



NIGHTMARE AT 20,000 FEET

HORROR STORIES BY
RICHARD MATHESON

"He sneaked. You saw in the hands of a reader who only can
grovel and grope round. He will bring you down... and when
you draw your knives he will leave you with the greatest gift
a writer can give. He will leave you waiting more."

FROM THE INTRODUCTION BY

STEPHEN KING

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Introduction by Stephen King

To say that Richard Matheson invented the horror story would be as ridiculous as it would be to say that Elvis Presley invented rock and roll-what, the purist would scream, about Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Stick McGhee, The Robins, and a dozen others? The same is true in the horror genre, which is the literary equivalent of rock and roll-a quick hit to the head that bops your nerves and

makes them hurt so good.

Before Matheson came dozens, going back to the author of the Grendel story, and Mary Shelley, and Horace Walpole, and Edgar Allan Poe, and Bram Stoker, and H. P. Lovecraft, and...

But like rock and roll, or any other genre that skates across the nerve-endings, horror must constantly regenerate and renew itself or die.

In the early 1950s, when *Weird Tales* was dying its slow death and Robert Bloch, horror's greatest writer at the time, had turned to psychological tales (and at this same time Fritz Leiber, easily Bloch's equal, had fallen oddly silent for a time) and the genre was languishing in the horse latitudes, Richard Matheson came like a bolt of pure ozone lightning.

He single-handedly regenerated a stagnant genre, rejecting the conventions of the pulps which were already dying, incorporating sexual impulses and images into his work as Theodore Sturgeon had already begun to do in his science fiction, and writing a series of gut-bucket short stories that were like shots of white lightning.

What do I remember about those stories?

I remember what they taught me; the same thing rock's most recent regenerator, Bruce Springsteen, articulates in one of his songs: No retreat, baby, no surrender. I remember that Matheson would never give ground. When you thought it *had* to be over, that your nerves couldn't stand any more, *that* was when Matheson turned on the afterburners and went into overdrive. He wouldn't quit. He was relentless. The baroque intonations of Lovecraft, the perfervid prose of the pulps, the sexual innuendoes were all absent. You were faced with so much pure drive that only re-readings showed Matheson's wit, cleverness, and control.

When people talk about the genre, I guess they mention my name first, but without Richard Matheson, I wouldn't be around. He is as much my father as Bessie Smith was Elvis Presley's mother. He came when he was needed, and these stories hold all their original hypnotic appeal.

Be warned: You are in the hands of a writer who asks no quarter and gives none. He will wring you dry... and when you close this volume he will leave you with the greatest gift a writer can give: He will leave you wanting more.

1 - NIGHTMARE AT 20,000 FEET

Seat belt, please," said the stewardess cheerfully as she passed him.

Almost as she spoke, the sign above the archway which led to the forward compartment lit up—fasten seat belt—with, below, its attendant caution—NO

smoking. Drawing in a deep lungful, Wilson exhaled it in bursts, then pressed the cigarette into the armrest tray with irritable stabbing motions.

Outside, one of the engines coughed monstrosly, spewing out a cloud of fume which fragmented into the night air. The fuselage began to shudder and Wilson, glancing through the window, saw the exhaust of flame jetting whitely from the engine's nacelle. The second engine coughed, then roared, its propeller instantly a blur of revolution. With a tense submissiveness, Wilson fastened the belt across his lap.

Now all the engines were running and Wilson's head throbbed in unison with the fuselage. He sat rigidly, staring at the seat ahead as the DC-7 taxied across the apron, heating the night with the thundering blast of its exhausts.

At the edge of the runway, it halted. Wilson looked out through the window at the leviathan glitter of the terminal. By late morning, he thought, showered and cleanly dressed, he would be sitting in the office of one more contact discussing one more specious deal the net result of which would not add one jot of meaning to the history of mankind. It was all so damned-

Wilson gasped as the engines began their warm-up race preparatory to takeoff. The sound, already loud, became deafening-waves of sound that crashed against Wilson's ears like club blows. He opened his mouth as if to let it drain. His eyes took on the glaze of a suffering man, his hands drew in like tensing claws.

He started, legs retracting, as he felt a touch on his arm. Jerking aside his head, he saw the stewardess who had met him at the door. She was smiling down at him.

"Are you all right?" he barely made out her words.

Wilson pressed his lips together and agitated his hand at her as if pushing her away. Her smile flared into excess brightness, then fell as she turned and moved away.

The plane began to move. At first lethargically, like some behemoth struggling to overthrow the pull of its own weight. Then with more speed, forcing off the drag of friction. Wilson, turning to the window, saw the dark runway rushing by faster and faster. On the wing edge, there was a mechanical whining as the flaps descended. Then, imperceptibly, the giant wheels lost contact with the ground, the earth began to fall away. Trees flashed underneath, buildings, the darting quicksilver of car lights. The DC-7 banked slowly to the right, pulling itself upward toward the frosty glitter of the stars.

Finally, it levelled off and the engines seemed to stop until Wilson's adjusting ear caught the murmur of their cruising speed. A moment of relief slackened his muscles, imparting a sense of well-being. Then it was gone. Wilson sat immobile, staring at the NO SMOKING sign until it winked out, then, quickly,

lit a cigarette. Reaching into the seat-back pocket in front of him, he slid free his newspaper.

As usual, the world was in a state similar to his. Friction in diplomatic circles, earthquakes and gunfire, murder, rape, tornadoes and collisions, business conflicts, gangsterism. God's in his heaven, all's right with the world, thought Arthur Jeffrey Wilson.

Fifteen minutes later, he tossed the paper aside. His stomach felt awful. He glanced up at the signs beside the two lavatories. Both, illuminated, read OCCUPIED. He pressed out his third cigarette since takeoff and, turning off the overhead light, stared out through the window.

Along the cabin's length, people were already flicking out their lights and reclining their chairs for sleep. Wilson glanced at his watch. Eleven-twenty. He blew out tired breath. As he'd anticipated, the pills he'd taken before boarding hadn't done a bit of good.

He stood abruptly as the woman came out of the lavatory and, snatching up his bag, he started down the aisle.

His system, as expected, gave no cooperation. Wilson stood with a tired moan and adjusted his clothing. Having washed his hands and face, he removed the toilet kit from the bag and squeezed a filament of paste across his toothbrush.

As he brushed, one hand braced for support against the cold bulkhead, he looked out through the port. Feet away was the pale blue of the inboard propeller. Wilson visualized what would happen if it were to tear loose and, like a tri-bladed cleaver, come slicing in at him.

There was a sudden depression in his stomach. Wilson swallowed instinctively and got some paste-stained saliva down his throat. Gagging, he turned and spat into the sink, then, hastily, washed out his mouth and took a drink. Dear God, if only he could have gone by train; had his own compartment, taken a casual stroll to the club car, settled down in an easy chair with a drink and a magazine. But there was no such time or fortune in this world.

He was about to put the toilet kit away when his gaze caught on the oilskin envelope in the bag. He hesitated, then, setting the small briefcase on the sink, drew out the envelope and undid it on his lap.

He sat staring at the oil-glossed symmetry of the pistol. He'd carried it around with him for almost a year now. Originally, when he'd thought about it, it was in terms of money carried, protection from holdup, safety from teenage gangs in the cities he had to attend. Yet, far beneath, he'd always known there was no valid reason except one. A reason he thought more of every day. How simple it would be-here, now-

Wilson shut his eyes and swallowed quickly. He could still taste the toothpaste

in his mouth, a faint nettling of peppermint on the buds. He sat heavily in the throbbing chill of the lavatory, the oily gun resting in his hands. Until, quite suddenly, he began to shiver without control. God, let me go! his mind cried out abruptly.

"Let me go, *let me go*." He barely recognized the whimpering in his ears.

Abruptly, Wilson sat erect. Lips pressed together, he rewrapped the pistol and thrust it into his bag, putting the briefcase on top of it, zipping the bag shut. Standing, he opened the door and stepped outside, hurrying to his seat and sitting down, sliding the overnight bag precisely into place. He indented the armrest button and pushed himself back. He was a business man and there was business to be conducted on the morrow. It was as simple as that. The body needed sleep, he would give it sleep.

Twenty minutes later, Wilson reached down slowly and depressed the button, sitting up with the chair, his face a mask of vanquished acceptance. Why fight it? he thought. It was obvious he was going to stay awake. So that was that.

He had finished half of the crossword puzzle before he let the paper drop to his lap. His eyes were too tired. Sitting up, he rotated his shoulders, stretching the muscles of his back. Now what? he thought. He didn't want to read, he couldn't sleep. And there were still-he checked his watch-seven to eight hours left before Los Angeles was reached. How was he to spend them? He looked along the cabin and saw that, except for a single passenger in the forward compartment, everyone was asleep.

A sudden, overwhelming fury filled him and he wanted to scream, to throw something, to hit somebody. Teeth jammed together so rabidly it hurt his jaws, Wilson shoved aside the curtains with a spastic hand and stared out murderously through the window.

Outside, he saw the wing lights blinking off and on, the lurid flashes of exhaust from the engine cowlings. Here he was, he thought; twenty-thousand feet above the earth, trapped in a howling shell of death, moving through polar night toward-

Wilson twitched as lightning bleached the sky, washing its false daylight across the wing. He swallowed. Was there going to be a storm? The thought of rain and heavy winds, of the plane a chip in the sea of sky was not a pleasant one. Wilson was a bad flyer. Excess motion always made him ill. Maybe he should have taken another few Dramamines to be on the safe side. And, naturally, his seat was next to the emergency door. He thought about it opening accidentally; about himself sucked from the plane, falling, screaming.

Wilson blinked and shook his head. There was a faint tingling at the back of his

neck as he pressed close to the window and stared out. He sat there motionless, squinting. He could have sworn-

Suddenly, his stomach muscles jerked in violently and he felt his eyes strain forward. There was something crawling on the wing.

Wilson felt a sudden, nauseous tremor in his stomach. Dear God, had some dog or cat crawled onto the plane before takeoff and, in some way managed to hold on? It was a sickening thought. The poor animal would be deranged with terror. Yet, how, on the smooth, wind-blasted surface, could it possibly discover gripping places? Surely that was impossible. Perhaps, after all, it was only a bird or-

The lightning flared and Wilson saw that it was a man.

He couldn't move. Stupefied, he watched the black form crawling down the wing. *Impossible*. Somewhere, cased in layers of shock, a voice declared itself but Wilson did not hear. He was conscious of nothing but the titanic, almost muscle tearing leap of his heart-and of the man outside.

Suddenly, like ice-filled water thrown across him, there was a reaction; his mind sprang for the shelter of explanation. A mechanic had, through some incredible oversight, been taken up with the ship and had managed to cling to it even though the wind had torn his clothes away, even though the air was thin and close to freezing.

Wilson gave himself no time for refutation. Jarring to his feet, he shouted: "Stewardess! Stewardess!" his voice a hollow, ringing sound in the cabin. He pushed the button for her with a jabbing finger.

"Stewardess!"

She came running down the aisle, her face tightened with alarm. When she saw the look on his face, she stiffened in her tracks.

"There's a man out there! A man!" cried Wilson. "*What?*" Skin constricted on her cheeks, around her eyes.

"Look, *look!*" Hand shaking, Wilson dropped back into his seat and pointed out the window. "He's crawling on the-"

The words ended with a choking rattle in his throat. There was nothing on the wing.

Wilson sat there trembling. For a while, before he turned back, he looked at the reflection of the stewardess on the window. There was a blank expression on her face.

At last, he turned and looked up at her. He saw her red lips part as though she meant to speak but she said nothing, only placing the lips together again and swallowing. An attempted smile distended briefly at her features.

"I'm sorry," Wilson said. "It must have been a-"

He stopped as though the sentence were completed. Across the aisle a teenage girl was gaping at him with sleepy curiosity.

The stewardess cleared her throat. "Can I get you anything?" she asked.

"A glass of water," Wilson said.

The stewardess turned and moved back up the aisle.

Wilson sucked in a long breath of air and turned away from the young girl's scrutiny. He felt the same. That was the thing that shocked him most. Where were the visions, the cries, the pummelling of fists on temples, the tearing out of hair?

Abruptly he closed his eyes. There had been a man, he thought. There had, actually, been a man. That's why he felt the same. And yet, there couldn't have been. He knew that clearly.

Wilson sat with his eyes closed, wondering what Jacqueline would be doing now if she were in the seat beside him. Would she be silent, shocked beyond speaking? Or would she, in the more accepted manner, be fluttering around him, smiling, chattering, pretending that she hadn't seen? What would his sons think? Wilson felt a dry sob threatening in his chest. Oh, God-

"Here's your water, sir."

Twitching sharply, Wilson opened his eyes.

"Would you like a blanket?" inquired the stewardess.

"No." He shook his head. "Thank you," he added, wondering why he was being so polite.

"If you need anything, just ring," she said.

Wilson nodded.

Behind him, as he sat with the untouched cup of water in his hand, he heard the muted voices of the stewardess and one of the passengers. Wilson tightened with resentment. Abruptly, he reached down and, careful not to spill the water, pulled out the overnight bag. Unzipping it, he removed the box of sleeping capsules and washed two of them down. Crumpling the empty cup, he pushed it into the seat-pocket in front of him, then, not looking, slid the curtains shut. There-it was ended. One hallucination didn't make insanity.

Wilson turned onto his right side and tried to set himself against the fitful motion of the ship. He had to forget about this, that was the most important thing. He mustn't dwell on it. Unexpectedly, he found a wry smile forming on his lips. Well, by God, no one could accuse him of mundane hallucinations anyway. When he went at it, he did a royal job. A naked man crawling down a DC-7's wing at twenty-thousand feet, there was a chimera worthy of the noblest lunatic.

The humour faded quickly. Wilson felt chilled. It had been so clear, so vivid. How could the eyes see such a thing when it did not exist? How could what was

in his mind make the physical act of seeing work to its purpose so completely? He hadn't been groggy, in a daze-nor had it been a shapeless, gauzy vision. It had been sharply three-dimensional, fully a part of the things he saw which he *knew* were real. That was the frightening part of it. It had not been dreamlike in the least. He had looked at the wing and-

Impulsively, Wilson drew aside the curtain.

He did not know, immediately, if he would survive. It seemed as if all the contents of his chest and stomach were bloating horribly, the excess pushing up into his throat and head, choking away breath, pressing out his eyes. Imprisoned in this swollen mass, his heart pulsed strickenly, threatening to burst its case as Wilson sat, paralyzed.

Only inches away, separated from him by the thickness of a piece of glass, the man was staring at him.

It was a hideously malignant face, a face not human. Its skin was grimy, of a wide pored coarseness; its nose a squat, discoloured lump; its lips misshapen, cracked, forced apart by teeth of a grotesque size and crookedness; its eyes recessed and small-unblinking. All framed by shaggy, tangled hair which sprouted, too, in furry tufts from the man's ears and nose, birdlike, down across his cheeks.

Wilson sat riven to his chair, incapable of response. Time stopped and lost its meaning. Function and analysis ceased. All were frozen in an ice of shock. Only the beat of heart went on-alone, a frantic leaping in the darkness. Wilson could not so much as blink. Dull-eyed, breathless, he returned the creature's vacant stare.

Abruptly then, he closed his eyes and his mind, rid of the sight, broke free. It isn't there, he thought. He pressed his teeth together, breath quavering in his nostrils. It isn't there, *it simply is not there!*

Clutching at the armrests with pale-knuckled fingers, Wilson braced himself. There is no man out there, he told himself. It was impossible that there should be a man out there crouching on the wing looking at him.

He opened his eyes-

-to shrink against the seat back with a gagging inhalation. Not only was the man still there but he was grinning. Wilson turned his fingers in and dug the nails into his palms until pain flared. He kept it there until there was no doubt in his mind that he was fully conscious.

Then, slowly, arm quivering and numb, Wilson reached up for the button which would summon the stewardess. He would not make the same mistake again-cry out, leap to his feet, alarm the creature into flight. He kept reaching upward, a tremor of aghast excitement in his muscles now because the man was watching

him, the small eyes shifting with the movement of his arm.

He pressed the button carefully once, twice. Now come, he thought. Come with your objective eyes and see what I see-but *hurry*.

In the rear of the cabin, he heard a curtain being drawn aside and, suddenly, his body stiffened. The man had turned his caliban head to look in that direction. Paralyzed, Wilson stared at him. Hurry, he thought. For God's sake, hurry!

It was over in a second. The man's eyes shifted back to Wilson, across his lips a smile of monstrous cunning. Then with a leap, he was gone.

"Yes, sir?"

For a moment, Wilson suffered the fullest anguish of madness. His gaze kept jumping from the spot where the man had stood to the stewardess's questioning face, then back again. Back to the stewardess, to the wing, to the stewardess, his breath caught, his eyes stark with dismay.

"What is it?" asked the stewardess.

It was the look on her face that did it. Wilson closed a vice on his emotions. She couldn't possibly believe him. He realized it in an instant.

"I'm-I'm sorry," he faltered. He swallowed so dryly that it made a clicking noise in his throat. "It's nothing. I-apologize."

The stewardess obviously didn't know what to say. She kept leaning against the erratic yawing of the ship, one hand holding on to the back of the seat beside Wilson's, the other stirring limply along the seam of her skirt. Her lips were parted slightly as if she meant to speak but could not find the words.

"Well," she said finally and cleared her throat, "if you-need anything."

"Yes, yes. Thank you. Are we-going into a storm?"

The stewardess smiled hastily. "Just a small one," she said. "Nothing to worry about."

Wilson nodded with little twitching movements. Then, as the stewardess turned away, breathed in suddenly, his nostrils flaring. He felt certain that she already thought him mad but didn't know what to do about it because, in her course of training, there had been no instruction on the handling of passengers who thought they saw small men crouching on the wing.

Thought?

Wilson turned his head abruptly and looked outside. He stared at the dark rise of the wing, the spouting flare of the exhausts, the blinking lights. He'd *seen* the man-to that he'd swear. How could he be completely aware of everything around him-be, in all ways, sane and still imagine such a thing? Was it logical that the mind, in giving way, should, instead of distorting all reality, insert, within the still intact arrangement of details, one extraneous sight?

No, not logical at all.

Suddenly, Wilson thought about war, about the newspaper stories which recounted the alleged existence of creatures in the sky who plagued the Allied pilots in their duties. They called them gremlins, he remembered. Were there, actually, such beings? Did they, truly, exist up here, never falling, riding on the wind, apparently of bulk and weight, yet impervious to gravity?

He was thinking that when the man appeared again.

One second the wing was empty. The next, with an arcing descent, the man came jumping down to it. There seemed no impact. He landed almost fragily, short, hairy arms outstretched as if for balance. Wilson tensed. Yes, there was knowledge in his look. The man-was he to think of it as a man?-somehow understood that he had tricked Wilson into calling the stewardess in vain. Wilson felt himself tremble with alarm. How could he prove the man's existence to others? He looked around desperately. That girl across the aisle. If he spoke to her softly, woke her up, would she be able to-

No, the man would jump away before she could see. Probably to the top of the fuselage where no one could see him, not even the pilots in their cockpit. Wilson felt a sudden burst of self-condemnation that he hadn't gotten that camera Walter had asked for. Dear Lord, he thought, to be able to take a picture of the man.

He leaned in close to the window. What was the man doing?

Abruptly, darkness seemed to leap away as the wing was chalked with lightning and Wilson saw. Like an inquisitive child, the man was squatted on the hitching wing edge, stretching out his right hand toward one of the whirling propellers.

As Wilson watched, fascinatedly appalled, the man's hand drew closed and closer to the blurring gyre until, suddenly, it jerked away and the man's lips twitched back in a soundless cry. He's lost a finger! Wilson thought, sickened. But, immediately, the man reached forward again, gnarled finger extended, the picture of some monstrous infant trying to capture the spin of a fan blade.

If it had not been so hideously out of place it would have been amusing for, objectively seen, the man, at that moment, was a comic sight-a fairy tale troll somehow come to life, wind whipping at the hair across his head and body, all of his attention centred on the turn of the propeller. How could this be madness? Wilson suddenly thought. What self-revelation could this farcical little horror possibly bestow on him?

Again and again, as Wilson watched, the man reached forward. Again and again jerked back his fingers, sometimes, actually, putting them in his mouth as if to cool them. And, always, apparently checking, he kept glancing back across at his shoulder looking at Wilson. *He knows*, thought Wilson. Knows that this is a game between us. If I am able to get someone else to see him, then he loses. If I am the only witness, then he wins. The sense of faint amusement was gone

now. Wilson clenched his teeth. Why in hell didn't the pilots see!

Now the man, no longer interested in the propeller, was settling himself across the engine cowling like a man astride a bucking horse. Wilson stared at him. Abruptly a shudder plaited down his back. The little man was picking at the plates that sheathed the engine, trying to get his nails beneath them.

Impulsively, Wilson reached up and pushed the button for the stewardess. In the rear of the cabin, he heard her coming and, for a second, thought he'd fooled the man, who seemed absorbed with his efforts. At the last moment, however, just before the stewardess arrived, the man glanced over at Wilson. Then, like a marionette jerked upward from its stage by wires, he was flying up into the air.

"Yes?" She looked at him apprehensively.

"Will you-sit down, please?" he asked.

She hesitated. "Well, I-"

"Please."

She sat down gingerly on the seat beside his.

"What is it, Mr. Wilson?" she asked.

He braced himself.

"That man is still outside," he said.

The stewardess stared at him.

"The reason I'm telling you this," Wilson hurried on, "is that he's starting to tamper with one of the engines."

She turned her eyes instinctively toward the window.

"No, no, don't look," he told her. "He isn't there now." He cleared his throat viscidly. "He-jumps away whenever you come here."

A sudden nausea gripped him as he realized what she must be thinking. As he realized what he, himself, would think if someone told him such a story, a wave of dizziness seemed to pass across him and he thought-I *am* going mad!

"The point is this," he said, fighting off the thought. "If I'm not imagining this thing, the ship is in danger."

"Yes," she said.

"I know," he said. "You think I've lost my mind."

"Of course not," she said.

"All I ask is this," he said, struggling against the rise of anger. "Tell the pilots what I've said. Ask them to keep an eye on the wings. If they see nothing-all right. But if they do-"

The stewardess sat there quietly, looking at him. Wilson's hands curled into fists that trembled in his lap.

"Well?" he asked.

She pushed to her feet. "I'll tell them," she said.

Turning away, she moved along the aisle with a movement that was, to Wilson, poorly contrived-too fast to be normal yet, clearly, held back as if to reassure him that she wasn't fleeing. He felt his stomach churning as he looked out at the wing again.

Abruptly, the man appeared again, landing on the wing like some grotesque ballet dancer. Wilson watched him as he set to work again, straddling the engine casing with his thick, bare legs and picking at the plates.

Well, what was he so concerned about? thought Wilson. That miserable creature couldn't pry up rivets with his fingernails. Actually, it didn't matter if the pilots saw him or not-at least as far as the safety of the plane was concerned. As for his own personal reasons-

It was at that moment that the man pried up one edge of a plate.

Wilson gasped. "Here, quickly!" he shouted, noticing, up ahead, the stewardess and the pilot coming through the cockpit doorway.

The pilot's eyes jerked up to look at Wilson, then abruptly, he was pushing past the stewardess and lurching up the aisle.

"Hurry!" Wilson cried. He glanced out the window in time to see the man go leaping upward. That didn't matter now. There would be evidence.

"What's going on?" the pilot asked, stopping breathlessly beside his seat.

"He's torn up one of the engine plates!" said Wilson in a shaking voice.

"He's what?"

"The man outside!" said Wilson. "I tell you he's-!"

"Mister Wilson, keep your voice down!" ordered the pilot. Wilson's jaw went slack.

"I don't know what's going on here," said the pilot, "but-"

"Will you look?!" shouted Wilson.

"Mister Wilson, I'm warning you."

"For God's sake!" Wilson swallowed quickly, trying to repress the blinding rage he felt. Abruptly, he pushed back against his seat and pointed at the window with a palsied hand. "Will you, for God's sake, *look?*" he asked.

Drawing in an agitated breath, the pilot bent over. In a moment, his gaze shifted coldly to Wilson's. "Well?" he asked.

Wilson jerked his head around. The plates were in their normal position.

"Oh, now wait," he said before the dread could come. "I saw him pry that plate up."

"Mister Wilson, if you don't-"

"*I said I saw him pry it up,*" said Wilson.

The pilot stood there looking at him in the same withdrawn, almost aghast way as the stewardess had. Wilson shuddered violently.

"Listen, I saw him!" he cried. The sudden break in his voice appalled him.

In a second, the pilot was down beside him. "Mister Wilson, please," he said. "All right, you saw him. But remember there are other people aboard. We mustn't alarm them."

Wilson was too shaken to understand at first.

"You-mean you've *seen* him then?" he asked.

"Of course," the pilot said, "but we don't want to frighten the passengers. You can understand that."

"Of course, of course, I don't want to-"

Wilson felt a spastic coiling in his groin and lower stomach. Suddenly, he pressed his lips together and looked at the pilot with malevolent eyes.

"I understand," he said.

"The thing we have to remember-" began the pilot.

"We can stop now," Wilson said.

"Sir?"

Wilson shuddered. "Get out of here," he said.

"Mister Wilson, what-?"

"*Will you stop?*" Face whitening, Wilson turned from the pilot and stared out at the wing, eyes like stone.

He glared back suddenly.

"Rest assured I'd not say another word!" he snapped.

"Mr. Wilson, try to understand our-"

Wilson twisted away and stared out venomously at the engine. From a corner of his vision, he saw two passengers standing in the aisle looking at him. *Idiots!* his mind exploded. He felt his hands begin to tremble and, for a few seconds, was afraid that he was going to vomit. It's the motion, he told himself. The plane was bucking in the air now like a storm-tossed boat.

He realized that the pilot was still talking to him and, refocusing his eyes, he looked at the man's reflection in the window. Beside him, mutely sombre, stood the stewardess. Blind idiots, both of them, thought Wilson. He did not indicate his notice of their departure. Reflected on the window, he saw them heading toward the rear of the cabin. They'll be discussing me now, he thought. Setting up plans in case I grow violent.

He wished now that the man would reappear, pull off the cowling plate and ruin the engine. It gave him a sense of vengeful pleasure to know that only he stood between catastrophe and the more than thirty people aboard. If he chose, he could allow that catastrophe to take place. Wilson smiled without humour. There would be a royal suicide, he thought.

The little man dropped down again and Wilson saw that what he'd thought was

correct-the man had pressed the plate back into place before jumping away. For, now, he was prying it up again and it was raising easily, peeling back like skin excised by some grotesque surgeon. The motion of the wing was very broken but the man seemed to have no difficulty staying balanced.

Once more Wilson felt panic. What was he to do? No one believed him. If he tried to convince them any more they'd probably restrain him by force. If he asked the stewardess to sit by him it would be, at best, only a momentary reprieve. The second she departed or, remaining, fell asleep, the man would return. Even if she stayed awake beside him, what was to keep the man from tampering with the engines on the other wing? Wilson shuddered, a coldness of dread misting along his bones.

Dear God, there was nothing to be done.

He twitched as, across the window through which he watched the little man, the pilot's reflection passed. The insanity of the moment almost broke him-the man and the pilot within feet of each other, both seen by him yet not aware of one another. No, that was wrong. The little man had glanced across his shoulder as the pilot passed. As if he knew there was no need to leap off any more, that Wilson's capacity for interfering was at an end. Wilson suddenly trembled with mind-searing rage. I'll kill you! he thought! You filthy little animal, I'll *kill* you!

Outside, the engine faltered.

It lasted only for a second, but, in that second, it seemed to Wilson as if his heart had, also, stopped. He pressed against the window, staring. The man had bent the cowling plate far back and now was on his knees, poking a curious hand into the engine.

"Don't," Wilson heard the whimper of his own voice begging. *"Don't."*

Again, the engine failed. Wilson looked around in horror. Was everyone deaf? He raised his hand to press the button for the stewardess, then jerked it back. No, they'd lock him up, restrain him somehow. And he was the only one who knew what was happening, the only one who could help.

"God ..." Wilson bit his lower lip until the pain made him whimper. He twisted around again and jolted. The stewardess was hurrying down the rocking aisle. She'd heard it! He watched her fixedly and saw her glance at him as she passed his seat.

She stopped three seats down the aisle. Someone else had heard! Wilson watched the stewardess as she leaned over, talking to the unseen passenger. Outside, the engine coughed again. Wilson jerked his head around and looked out with horror pinched eyes.

"Damn you!" he whined.

He turned again and saw the stewardess coming back up the aisle. She didn't

look alarmed. Wilson stared at her with unbelieving eyes. It wasn't possible. He twisted around to follow her swaying movement and saw her turn in at the kitchen.

"No." Wilson was shaking so badly now he couldn't stop. No one had heard.

No one knew.

Suddenly, Wilson bent over and slid his overnight bag out from under the seat. Unzipping it, he jerked out his briefcase and threw it on the carpeting. Then, reaching in again, he grabbed the oilskin envelope and straightened up. From the corners of his eyes, he saw the stewardess coming back and pushed the bag beneath the seat with his shoes, shoving the oilskin envelope beside himself. He sat there rigidly, breath quavering in his chest, as she went by.

Then he pulled the envelope into his lap and untied it. His movements were so feverish that he almost dropped the pistol.

He caught it by the barrel, then clutched at the stock with white knuckled fingers and pushed off the safety catch. He glanced outside and felt himself grow cold.

The man was looking at him.

Wilson pressed his shaking lips together. It was impossible that the man knew what he intended. He swallowed and tried to catch his breath. He shifted his gaze to where the stewardess was handing some pills to the passenger ahead, then looked back at the wing. The man was turning to the engine once again, reaching in. Wilson's grip tightened on the pistol. He began to raise it.

Suddenly, he lowered it. The window was too thick. The bullet might be deflected and kill one of the passengers. He shuddered and stared out at the little man. Again the engine failed and Wilson saw an eruption of sparks cast light across the man's animal features. He braced himself. There was only one answer.

He looked down at the handle of the emergency door. There was a transparent cover over it. Wilson pulled it free and dropped it. He looked outside. The man was still there, crouched and probing at the engine with his hand. Wilson sucked in trembling breath. He put his left hand on the door handle and tested. It wouldn't move downward. Upward there was play.

Abruptly, Wilson let go and put the pistol in his lap. No time for argument, he told himself. With shaking hands, he buckled the belt across his thighs. When the door was opened, there would be a tremendous rushing out of air. For the safety of the ship, he must not go with it.

Now. Wilson picked the pistol up again, his heartbeat staggering. He'd have to be sudden, accurate. If he missed, the man might jump onto the other wing—worse, onto the tail assembly where, inviolate, he could rupture wires, mangle flaps, destroy the balance of the ship. No, this was the only way. He'd fire low

and try to hit the man in the chest or stomach. Wilson filled his lungs with air. Now, he thought. Now.

The stewardess came up the aisle as Wilson started pulling at the handle. For a moment, frozen in her steps, she couldn't speak. A look of stupefied horror distended her features and she raised one hand as if imploring him. Then, suddenly, her voice was shrilling above the noise of the engines.

"Mr. Wilson, no!"

"Get back!" cried Wilson and he wrenched the handle up.

The door seemed to disappear. One second it was by him, in his grip. The next, with a hissing roar, it was gone.

In the same instant, Wilson felt himself enveloped by a monstrous suction which tried to tear him from his seat. His head and shoulders left the cabin and, suddenly, he was breathing tenuous, freezing air. For a moment, eardrums almost bursting from the thunder of the engines, eyes blinded by the arctic winds, he forgot the man. It seemed he heard a prick of screaming in the maelstrom that surrounded him, a distant shout.

Then Wilson saw the man.

He was walking across the wing, gnarled form leaning forward, talon twisted hands outstretched in eagerness. Wilson flung his arm up, fired. The explosion was like a popping in the roaring violence of the air. The man staggered, lashed out and Wilson felt a streak of pain across his head. He fired again at immediate range and saw the man go flailing backward-then, suddenly, disappear with no more solidity than a paper doll swept in a gale. Wilson felt a bursting numbness in his brain. He felt the pistol torn from failing fingers.

Then all was lost in winter darkness.

He stirred and mumbled. There was a warmth trickling in his veins, his limbs felt wooden. In the darkness, he could hear a shuffling sound, a delicate swirl of voices. He was lying, face up, on something-moving, joggling. A cold wind sprinkled on his face, he felt the surface tilt beneath him.

He sighed. The plane was landed and he was being carried off on a stretcher. His head wound, likely, plus an injection to quiet him.

"Nuttiest way of tryin' to commit suicide I ever heard of," said a voice somewhere.

Wilson felt the pleasure of amusement. Whoever spoke was wrong, of course. As would be established soon enough when the engine was examined and they checked his wound more closely. Then they'd realize that he'd saved them all.

Wilson slept without dreams.

2 - DRESS OF WHITE SILK

Quiet is here and all in me.

Granma locked me in my room and won't let me out. Because it's happened she says. I guess I was bad. Only it was the dress. Momma's dress I mean. She is gone away forever. Granma says your momma is in heaven. I don't know how. Can she go in heaven if she's dead?

Now I hear Granma. She is in momma's room. She is putting mommas dress down the box. Why does she always? And locks it too. I wish she didn't. It's a pretty dress and smells sweet so. And warm. I love to touch it against my cheek. But I can't never again. I guess that is why Granma is mad at me.

But I amnt sure. All day it was only like every day. Mary Jane came over to my house. She lives across the street. Every day she comes to my house and play. Today she was.

I have seven dolls and a fire truck. Today Granma said play with your dolls and it. Don't you go inside your mommas room now she said. She always says it. She just means not mess up I think. Because she says it all the time. Don't go in your mommas room. Like that.

But it's nice in mommas room. When it rains I go there. Or when Granma is doing her nap I do. I don't make noise. I just sit on the bed and touch the white cover. Like when I was only small. The room smells like sweet.

I make believe momma is dressing and I am allowed in. I smell her white silk dress. Her going out for night dress. She called it that I don't remember when.

I hear it moving if I listen hard. I make believe to see her sitting at the dressing table. Like touching on perfume or something I mean. And see her dark eyes. I can remember.

It's so nice if it rains and I see eyes on the window. The rain sounds like a big giant outside. He says shush shush so everyone will be quiet. I like to make believe that in mommas room.

What I like almost best is to sit at mommas dressing table. It is like pink and big and smells sweet too. The seat in front has a pillow sewed in it. There are bottles and bottles with bumps and have collared perfume in them. And you can see almost your whole self in the mirror.

When I sit there I make believe to be momma. I say be quiet mother I am going out and you can not stop me. It is something I say I don't know why like I hear it

in me. And oh stop your sobbing mother they will not catch me I have my magic dress.

When I pretend I brush my hair long. But I only use my own brush from my room. I didn't never use mommas brush. I don't think granma is mad at me for that because I never use mommas brush. I wouldn't never.

Sometimes I did open the box up. Because I know where Granma puts the key. I saw her once when she wouldn't know I saw her. She puts the key on the hook in momma's closet. Behind the door I mean.

I could open the box lots of times. That's because I like to look at mommas dress. I like best to look at it. It is so pretty and feels soft and like silky. I could touch it for a million years.

I kneel on the rug with roses on it. I hold the dress in my arms and like breathe from it. I touch it against my cheek. I wish I could take it to sleep with me and hold it. I like to. Now I can't. Because Granma says. And she says I should burn it up but I loved her so. And she cries about the dress.

I wasn't never bad with it. I put it back neat like it was never touched. Granma never knew. I laughed that she never knew before. But she knows now I did it I guess. And shell punish me. What did it hurt her? Wasn't it my mommas dress?

What I like real best in mommas room is look at the picture of momma. It has a gold thing around it. Frame is what Granma says. It is on the wall on top the bureau.

Momma is pretty. Your momma was pretty Granma says. Why does she? I see momma there smiling on me and she *is* pretty. For always.

Her hair is black. Like mine. Her eyes are even pretty like black. Her mouth is red so red. I like the dress and it's the white one. It is all down on her shoulders. Her skin is white almost white like the dress. And so are her hands. She is so pretty. I love her even if she is gone away forever. I love her so much.

I guess I think that's what made me bad. I mean to Mary Jane.

Mary Jane came from lunch like she does. Granma went to do her nap. She said don't forget now no going to your mommas room. I told her no Granma. And I was saying the truth but then Mary Jane and I was playing fire truck. Mary Jane said I bet you haven't no mother I bet you made up it all she said.

I got mad at her. I have a momma I know. She made me mad at her to say I made up it all. She said I'm a liar. I mean about the bed and the dressing table and the picture and the dress even and everything.

I said well I'll show you smarty.

I looked into grammas room. She was doing her nap still. I went down and said

Mary Jane to come on because Granma won't know.

She wasn't so smart after then. She giggled like she does. Even she made a scaredy noise when she hit into the table in the hall upstairs. I said you're a scaredy cat to her. She said back well *my* house isn't so dark like this. Like that was so much.

We went in mommas room. It was more dark than you could see. I said this is my momma's room I suppose I made up it all.

She was by the door and she wasn't smart then either. She didn't say any word. She looked around the room. She jumped when I got her arm. Well come on I said.

I sat on the bed and said this is my mommas bed see how soft it is. She didn't say nothing. Scaredy cat I said. Am not she said like she does.

I said to sit down how can you tell if it's soft if you don't sit down. She sat down by me. I said feel how soft it is. Smell how sweet it is.

I closed my eyes but funny it wasn't like always. Because Mary Jane was there. I told her to stop feeling the cover. You said to she said. Well stop it I said.

See I said and I pulled her up. That's the dressing table. I took her and brought her there. She said let go. It was so quiet and like always. I started to feel bad. Because Mary Jane was there. Because it was in my momma's room and momma wouldn't like Mary Jane there.

But I had to show her the things because. I showed her the mirror. We looked at each other in it. She looked white. Mary Jane is a scaredy cat I said. Am not am not she said anyway nobody's house is so quiet and dark inside. Anyway she said it smells.

I got mad at her. No it doesn't smell I said. Does so she said you said it did. I got madder too. It smells like sugar she said. It smells like sick people in your momma's room.

Don't say my momma's room is like sick people I said to her.

Well you didn't show me no dress and you're lying she said there isn't no dress. I felt all warm inside so I pulled her hair. I'll show you I said you're going to see my mommas dress and you'll better not call me a liar.

I made her stand still and I got the key off the hook. I kneeled down. I opened the box with the key.

Mary Jane said pew that smells like garbage.

I put my nails in her and she pulled away and got mad. Don't you pinch me she said and she was all red. I'm telling my mother on you she said. And anyway it's not a white dress it's dirty and ugly she said.

Its not dirty I said. I said it so loud I wonder why Granma didn't hear. I pulled out the dress from the box. I held it up to show her how it's white. It fell open

like the rain whispering and the bottom touched on the rug.

It is too white I said all white and clean and silky.

No she said she was so mad and red it has a hole in it. I got more madder. If my momma was here shed show you I said. You got no momma she said all ugly. I hate her.

I have. I said it way loud. I pointed my finger to momma's picture. Well who can see in this stupid dark room she said. I pushed her hard and she hit against the bureau. See then I said mean look at the picture. That's my momma and she's the most beautiful lady in the world.

She's ugly she has funny hands Mary Jane said. She hasn't I said she's the most beautiful lady in the world!

Not not she said *she has buck teeth.*

I don't remember then. I think the dress moved in my arms. Mary Jane screamed. I don't remember what. It got dark and the curtains were closed I think I couldn't see anyway. I couldn't hear nothing except buck teeth funny hands buck teeth funny hands even when no one was saying it.

There was something else because I think I heard someone call *don't let her say that!* I couldn't hold to the dress. And I had it on me I can't remember. Because I was grown up strong. But I was a little girl still I think I mean outside.

I think I was terrible bad then.

Granma took me away from there I guess. I don't know. She was screaming god help us it's happened it's happened. Over and over. I don't know why. She pulled me all the way here to my room and locked me in. She won't let me out. Well I'm not so scared. Who cares if she locks me in a million billion years? She doesn't have to even give me supper. I'm not hungry anyway.

I'm full.

3 - BLOOD SON

The people on the block decided definitely that Jules was crazy when they heard about his composition.

There had been suspicions for a long time.

He made people shiver with his blank stare. His coarse guttural tongue sounded unnatural in his frail body. The paleness of his skin upset many children. It

seemed to hang loose around his flesh. He hated sunlight.

And his ideas were a little out of place for the people who lived on the block.

Jules wanted to be a vampire.

People declared it common knowledge that he was born on a night when winds uprooted trees. They said he was born with three teeth. They said he'd used them to fasten himself on his mother's breast drawing blood with the milk.

They said he used to cackle and bark in his crib after dark. They said he walked at two months and sat staring at the moon whenever it shone.

Those were things that people said.

His parents were always worried about him. An only child, they noticed his flaws quickly.

They thought he was blind until the doctor told them it was just a vacuous stare. He told them that Jules, with his large head, might be a genius or an idiot. It turned out he was an idiot.

He never spoke a word until he was five. Then, one night coming up to supper, he sat down at the table and said "Death."

His parents were torn between delight and disgust. They finally settled for a place in between the two feelings. They decided that Jules couldn't have realized what the word meant.

But Jules did.

From that night on, he built up such a large vocabulary that everyone who knew him was astonished. He not only acquired every word spoken to him, words from signs, magazines, books; he made up his own words.

Like- *nightouch*. Or- *killove*. They were really several words that melted into each other. They said things Jules felt but couldn't explain with other words.

He used to sit on the porch while the other children played hopscotch, stickball and other games. He sat there and stared at the sidewalk and made up words.

Until he was twelve Jules kept pretty much out of trouble.

Of course there was the time they found him undressing Olive Jones in an alley. And another time he was discovered dissecting a kitten on his bed.

But there were many years in between. Those scandals were forgotten.

In general he went through childhood merely disgusting people.

He went to school but never studied. He spent about two or three terms in each grade. The teachers all knew him by his first name. In some subjects like reading and writing he was almost brilliant.

In others he was hopeless.

One Saturday when he was twelve, Jules went to the movies. He saw *Dracula*.

When the show was over he walked, a throbbing nerve mass, through the little

girl and boy ranks.

He went home and locked himself in the bathroom for two hours.

His parents pounded on the door and threatened but he wouldn't come out.

Finally he unlocked the door and sat down at the supper table. He had a bandage on his thumb and a satisfied look on his face.

The morning after he went to the library. It was Sunday. He sat on the steps all day waiting for it to open. Finally he went home.

The next morning he came back instead of going to school.

He found *Dracula* on the shelves. He couldn't borrow it because he wasn't a member and to be a member he had to bring in one of his parents.

So he stuck the book down his pants and left the library and never brought it back.

He went to the park and sat down and read the book through. It was late evening before he finished.

He started at the beginning again, reading as he ran from street light to street light, all the way home.

He didn't hear a word of the scolding he got for missing lunch and supper. He ate, went in his room and read the book to the finish. They asked him where he got the book. He said he found it.

As the days passed Jules read the story over and over. He never went to school.

Late at night, when he had fallen into an exhausted slumber, his mother used to take the book into the living room and show it to her husband.

One night they noticed that Jules had underlined certain sentences with dark shaky pencil lines.

Like: "The lips were crimson with fresh blood and the stream had trickled over her chin and stained the purity of her lawn death robe."

Or: "When the blood began to spurt out, he took my hands in one of his, holding them tight and, with the other seized my neck and pressed my mouth to the wound..."

When his mother saw this, she threw the book down the garbage chute.

In the next morning when Jules found the book missing he screamed and twisted his mother's arm until she told him where the book was.

Then he ran down to the cellar and dug in the piles of garbage until he found the book.

Coffee grounds and egg yolk on his hands and wrists, he went to the park and read it again.

For a month he read the book avidly. Then he knew it so well he threw it away and just thought about it.

Absence notes were coming from school. His mother yelled. Jules decided to go back for a while.

He wanted to write a composition.

One day he wrote it in class. When everyone was finished writing, the teacher asked if anyone wanted to read their composition to the class.

Jules raised his hand.

The teacher was surprised. But she felt charity. She wanted to encourage him. She drew in her tiny jab of a chin and smiled.

"All right," she said. "Pay attention children. Jules is going to read us his composition."

Jules stood up. He was excited. The paper shook in his hands.

"My Ambition by..."

"Come to the front of the class, Jules, dear."

Jules went to the front of the class. The teacher smiled lovingly. Jules started again.

"My Ambition by Jules Dracula."

The smile sagged.

"When I grow up I want to be a vampire."

The teacher's smiling lips jerked down and out. Her eyes popped wide.

"I want to live forever and get even with everybody and make all the girls vampires. I want to smell of death."

"Jules!"

"I want to have a foul breath that stinks of dead earth and crypts and sweet coffins."

The teacher shuddered. Her hands twitched on her green blotter. She couldn't believe her ears. She looked at the children. They were gaping. Some of them were giggling. But not the girls.

"I want to be all cold and have rotten flesh with stolen blood in the veins."

"That will... hrrumph!"

The teacher cleared her throat mightily.

"That will be all Jules," she said.

Jules talked louder and desperately.

"I want to sink my terrible white teeth in my victims' necks. I want them to..."

"Jules! Go to your seat this instant!"

"I want them to slide like razors in the flesh and into the veins," read Jules ferociously

The teacher jolted to her feet. Children were shivering. None of them were giggling.

"Then I want to draw my teeth out and let the blood flow easy in my mouth and run hot in my throat and..."

The teacher grabbed his arm. Jules tore away and ran to a corner. Barricaded behind a stool he yelled:

"And drip off my tongue and run out my lips down my victims' throats! I want to drink girls' blood!"

The teacher lunged for him. She dragged him out of the corner. He clawed at her and screamed all the way to the door and the principal's office.

"That is my ambition! That is my ambition! *That is my ambition?*"

It was grim.

Jules was locked in his room. The teacher and the principal sat with Jules's parents. They were talking in sepulchral voices.

They were recounting the scene.

All along the block parents were discussing it. Most of them didn't believe it at first. They thought their children made it up.

Then they thought what horrible children they'd raised if the children could make up such things.

So they believed it.

After that everyone watched Jules like a hawk. People avoided his touch and look. Parents pulled their children off the street when he approached. Everyone whispered tales of him.

There were more absence notes.

Jules told his mother he wasn't going to school anymore. Nothing would change his mind. He never went again.

When a truant officer came to the apartment Jules would run over the roofs until he was far away from there.

A year wasted by

Jules wandered the streets searching for something; he didn't know what. He looked in alleys. He looked in garbage cans. He looked in lots. He looked on the east side and the west side and in the middle.

He couldn't find what he wanted.

He rarely slept. He never spoke. He stared down all the time. He forgot his special words.

Then.

One day in the park, Jules strolled through the zoo.

An electric shock passed through him when he saw the vampire bat.

His eyes grew wide and his discoloured teeth shone dully in a wide smile.

From that day on, Jules went daily to the zoo and looked at the bat. He spoke to it and called it the Count. He felt in his heart it was really a man who had changed.

A rebirth of culture struck him.

He stole another book from the library. It told all about wild life.

He found the page on the vampire bat. He tore it out and threw the book away.

He learned the selection by heart.

He knew how the bat made its wound. How it lapped up the blood like a kitten drinking cream. How it walked on folded wing stalks and hind legs like a black furry spider. Why it took no nourishment but blood.

Month after month Jules stared at the bat and talked to it. It became the one comfort in his life. The one symbol of dreams come true.

One day Jules noticed that the bottom of the wire covering the cage had come loose.

He looked around, his black eyes shifting. He didn't see anyone looking. It was a cloudy day. Not many people were there. Jules tugged at the wire. It moved a little. Then he saw a man come out of the monkey house. So he pulled back his hand and strolled away whistling a song he had just made up.

Late at night, when he was supposed to be asleep he would walk barefoot past his parents' room. He would hear his father and mother snoring. He would hurry out, put on his shoes and run to the zoo.

Every time the watchman was not around, Jules would tug at the wiring.

He kept on pulling it loose.

When he was finished and had to run home, he pushed the wire in again. Then no one could tell.

All day Jules would stand in front of the cage and look at the Count and chuckle and tell him he'd soon be free again.

He told the Count all the things he knew. He told the Count he was going to practice climbing down walls head first.

He told the Count not to worry. He'd soon be out. Then, together, they could go all around and drink girls' blood.

One night Jules pulled the wire out and crawled under it into the cage.

It was very dark.

He crept on his knees to the little wooden house. He listened to see if he could hear the Count squeaking.

He stuck his arm in the black doorway. He kept whispering.

He jumped when he felt a needle jab in his finger.

With a look of great pleasure on his thin face, Jules drew the fluttering hairy bat to him.

He climbed down from the cage with it and ran out of the zoo; out of the park. He ran down the silent streets.

It was getting late in the morning. Light touched the dark skies with gray. He couldn't go home. He had to have a place.

He went down an alley and climbed over a fence. He held tight to the bat. It lapped at the dribble of blood from his finger.

He went across a yard and into a little deserted shack.

It was dark inside and damp. It was full of rubble and tin cans and soggy cardboard and excrement.

Jules made sure there was no way the bat could escape.

Then he pulled the door tight and put a stick through the metal loop.

He felt his heart beating hard and his limbs trembling. He let go of the bat. It flew to a dark corner and hung on the wood.

Jules feverishly tore off his shirt. His lips shook. He smiled a crazy smile.

He reached down into his pants pocket and took out a little pen knife he had stolen from his mother.

He opened it and ran a finger over the blade. It sliced through the flesh.

With shaking fingers he jabbed at his throat. He hacked. The blood ran through his fingers.

"Count! Count!" he cried in frenzied joy. "Drink my red blood! Drink me! Drink me!"

He stumbled over the tin cans and slipped and felt for the bat. It sprang from the wood and soared across the shack and fastened itself on the other side.

Tears ran down Jules's cheeks.

He gritted his teeth. The blood ran across his shoulders and across his thin hairless chest.

His body shook in fever. He staggered back toward the other side. He tripped and felt his side torn open on the sharp edge of a tin can.

His hands went out. They clutched the bat. He placed it against his throat. He sank on his back on the cool wet earth. He sighed.

He started to moan and clutch at his chest. His stomach heaved. The black bat on his neck silently lapped his blood.

Jules felt his life seeping away.

He thought of all the years past. The waiting. His parents. School. Dracula. Dreams. For this. This sudden glory.

Jules's eyes flickered open.
The inside of the reeking shack swam about him.
It was hard to breathe. He opened his mouth to gasp in the air. He sucked it in.
It was foul. It made him cough. His skinny body lurched on the cold ground.
Mists crept away in his brain.
One by one like drawn veils.
Suddenly his mind was filled with terrible clarity.
He felt the aching pain in his side.
He knew he was lying half naked on garbage and letting a flying bat drink his blood.
With a strangled cry, he reached up and tore away the furry throbbing bat. He flung it away from him. It came back, fanning his face with its vibrating wings.
Jules staggered to his feet.
He felt for the door. He could hardly see. He tried to stop his throat from bleeding so.
He managed to get the door open.
Then, lurching into the dark yard, he fell on his face in the long grass blades.
He tried to call out for help.
But no sounds save a bubbling mockery of words came from his lips.
He heard the fluttering wings.
Then, suddenly they were gone.
Strong fingers lifted him gently. Through dying eyes Jules saw the tall dark man whose eyes shone like rubies.
"My son," the man said.

4 - THROUGH CHANNELS

Click

Swish swish swish

All set, Sergeant?

Set.

Okay. This recording made on January fifteenth, nineteen fifty-four, twenty-third precinct police... '

Swish

... in the presence of Detective James Taylor and, uh, Sergeant Louis Ferazzio.

Swish swish

Name, please.

Huh?

What's your name, son?

My name?

Come on, son, we're trying to help you.

Swish

L-Leo.

Last name.

I d-don't... Leo.

What's your last name, son?

Vo... Vo...

All right, son. Take it easy.

V-Vogel.

Leo Vogel. That it?

Yeah.

Address?

T-twenny two thirty, avena J.

Age?

I'm... almost... Where's... my ma?

Swish swish

Turn it off a minute, Sergeant.

Right.

Click

Click

Swish

All right, son. Okay now?

Y-yeah. But where...?

You're how old?

Fi-fifteen.

Now, uh, where were you last night from six o'clock till you went home?

I was... at... at the show. Ma give... give me the dough.

How come you didn't stay home to watch television with your parents?

'Cause. Because...

Yes?

The Le-Lenottis was comin' over to watch it with them.

They came often?

N-no. It was the first time they'd... ever come.

Uh-huh. So your mother sent you to the movies.

Y-yeah.

Sergeant, give the kid some of that coffee. And see if you can him find a blanket.

Right away, chief

Now, uh, son. What time did you get out of the movies?

Time? I... don't know what time.

About nine-thirty, would you say?

I guess. I don't know... w-what time. All I...

Yes?

Nothin'.

Well, you saw the show only once, didn't you?

Swish

Huh?

You saw it only once. You didn't see any picture twice, did you?

No. No, I only seen it once.

Okay. That would make it, uh...

Swish

... roughly about nine-thirty, then, that you got out of the movies. You went home right away?

Yeah... I mean no.

Where did you stop?

I had a Coke at the... at the drugstore.

I see. Then you went home.

Ye-

Swish.

... yeah, then I went home.

The house was dark?

Yeah. But... they never used no lights when they watched TV.

Uh-huh. You went in?

Y-yeah.

Take a sip of that coffee, son, before it gets cold. Take it easy, take it easy. Don't choke on it. There. Okay?

Yeah.

All right then. Now... oh, good. Put it over his shoulders, Sergeant. There we go. Better?

Mmmm

Okay. Let's get on with it. And believe me, son, this is no more fun for us than it is for you. We saw it too.

I want mama. I want her. Please, can I...

Oh. What did I... well, shut it off, Sergeant. Here kid. You don't have a handkerchief, do you? Here. Did you shut it off, Sergeant?

Oh. Right away.

Swish click

Click

When you went in, was there anything... peculiar?

What?

You told us last night you smelled something.

Yeah. It... it... There was a funny smell.

Anything you know?

Huh?

Did it smell like anything you ever smelled before?

No. It wasn't much. Not in the... hall.

All right. So you went into the living room.

No. No. I went... Ma. Can I...

Swish swish

Come on, son, snap out of it. We know you've had a bad time. But we're trying to help.

Swish swish swish

You, uh, didn't go in the living room. Didn't you think you should mention that smell?

I... h-heard the set on and...

Set?

The TV set. I thought-I figured they were still watchin'.

And?

And ma didn't like me to... b-bust in on them. So I went up to my room so's I wouldn't... you know.

Bother them.

Y-yeah.

Okay. How long were you up there?

I was... I don't know how long. Maybe an hour.

And?

There... wasn't no sound downstairs.

Nothing at all?

No. There wasn't nothing at all.

Didn't that make you suspicious?

Yeah. Well, I figured... they'd... laugh at somethin' or talk loud or...

Dead quiet.

Yeah. Dead quiet.

Did you go down then?

L-later I went. I was goin' to bed. I figured I...

You wanted to say goodnight.

Yeah. I...

Swish

You went down and opened the living room door?

Yeah, I... yeah.

What did you see?

I... I... Oh, can't ya... I want my ma. Lemme alone. I want her!

Kid! Hold him, Sergeant. Take it easy!

Swish swish

I'm sorry, kid. Did it hurt? I had to calm you. I know...how you feel, Leo. We saw it too. We feel sick and... awful too.

Swish

Just a few more questions and we'll take you to your aunt's. Now first. The television set. Was it on?

Yeah. It was on.

And you... smelled something?

Yeah. Like in the hall. Only worse. Only lots worse.

That smell.

That smell. Dead. A dead stink. Like a pile o' dead... dead... I don't know. Garbage. Piles of it.

No one was talking?

No, there was no thin'. 'Cept the TV.

What was on it?

I already told ya.

I know, I know. Tell us again. For the record.

It was... like I said...just them letters. Great big letters.

What were they?

F... uh... F-E-E-D.

F-E-E-D?

Y-yeah. Big crooked-like letters.

You'd seen them before?

Yeah. I told ya. They was on our set all the time... Not all the time. Plenty though.

Your parents never wondered about it?

No. They said... they figured it was a sort of commercial. You know.

But the things you saw.

I don't know. Ma said... it was for kids. Some, I mean.

What-did you see?

Swish swish swish

Sort of... mouths. Big ones. Wide. Open, all open. They wasn't p-people.

Swish

What did it look like? I mean, couldn't you tell what it was?

No. I mean... they was like... bugs, maybe, or maybe... w-worms. Big ones. All mouths. Wide open.

All right.

Swish

You, uh, said the letters flashed on, then off and you saw the... mouths, and then the letters again?

Yeah. Like that.

This happen every night?

Yeah.

Same time?

No. Different times.

Between programs?

No. Anytime.

Was it always on the same channel?

No. All different ones. No matter which one we had... we seen them.

And...

I wanna go. Can't I... Ma! Where is she? I want her. I want her.

Swish click

Click

A few more questions, Leo, and that's it. Now, you said your parents never had the set checked.

No, I told you. They thought it was-

All right.

Swish

You went in the living room. You said something about slipping, didn't you?

Yeah. On that stuff.

What stuff?

I don't know. Greasy stuff. Like hot grease. It stunk awful.

And then you... you found...

Swish

I found them. Ma. And Pa. And the Lenottis. They was... Ohhh, I wanna...

Leo! What about the set, Leo? What about it?

Huh, what?

The picture on the set. You said something about it.

I, yeah... I...

It was the letters, wasn't it, Leo?

Yeah, yeah. Them letters. Them big crooked letters. They was up there. On the set. I seen them. And... and...

What?

One of the E's. It kinda... faded. It went away. And... and...

What, Leo?

The other letters. They come together. So... so there was only three.

And it was a word.

Swish swish swish

Take him to his aunt, Sergeant.

And the tube went black...

All right, Leo. The sergeant'll take you ho-to your aunt's.

I turned on the lights.

All right, Leo.

I turned on the light! Ma! MAMA!

Click

5 - WITCH WAR

Seven pretty little girls sitting in a row.

Outside, night, pouring rain-war weather. Inside, toasty warm. Seven overalled little girls chatting. Plaque on the wall saying: P.G. CENTER. Sky clearing its throat with thunder, picking and dropping lint lightning from immeasurable shoulders. Rain hushing the world, bowing the trees, pocking earth. Square building, low, with one wall plastic. Inside, the buzzing talk of seven pretty little

girls. "So I say to him-'Don't give me that, Mr. High and Mighty.' So he says, 'Oh yeah?' And I say, 'Yeah!' "

"Honest, will I ever be glad when this thing's over. I saw the cutest hat on my last furlough. Oh, what I wouldn't give to wear it!"

"You too? Don't I *know* it! You just can't get your hair right.

Not in *this* weather. Why don't they let us get rid of it?" "*Men!* They make me sick." Seven gestures, seven postures, seven laughter's ringing thin beneath thunder. Teeth showing in girl giggles. Hands tireless, painting pictures in the air.

P.G. Centre. Girls. Seven of them. Pretty. Not one over sixteen. Curls. Pigtails. Bangs. Pouting little lips-smiling, frowning, shaping emotion on emotion. Sparkling young eyes-glittering, twinkling, narrowing, cold or warm.

Seven healthy young bodies restive on wooden chairs. Smooth adolescent limbs. Girls-pretty girls-seven of them.

An army of ugly shapeless men, stumbling in mud, struggling along the pitch black muddy road.

Rain a torrent. Buckets of it thrown on each exhausted man. Sucking sound of great boots sinking into oozy yellow-brown mud, pulling loose. Mud dripping from heels and soles.

Plodding men-hundreds of them-soaked, miserable, depleted. Young men bent over like old men. Jaws hanging loosely, mouth gasping at black wet air, tongues lolling, sunken eyes looking at nothing, betraying nothing.

Rest.

Men sink down in the mud, fall on their packs. Heads thrown back, mouths open, rain splashing on yellow teeth. Hands immobile-sprawny heaps of flesh and bone. Legs without motion-khaki lengths of worm-eaten wood. Hundreds of useless limbs fixed to hundreds of useless trunks.

In back, ahead, beside, rumble trucks and tanks and tiny cars. Thick tires splattering mud. Fat treads sinking, tearing at mucky slime. Rain drumming wet fingers on metal and canvas.

Lightning flashbulbs without pictures. Momentary burst of light. The face of war seen for a second-made of rusty guns and turning wheels and faces staring.

Blackness. A night hand blotting out the brief storm glow. Windblown rain flitting over fields and roads, drenching trees and trucks. Rivulets of bubbly rain tearing scars from the earth. Thunder, lightning.

A whistle. Dead men resurrected. Boots in sucking mud again-deeper, closer, nearer. Approach to a city that bars the way to a city that bars the way to a...

An officer sat in the communication room of the P.G. Centre. He peered at the operator, who sat hunched over the control board, phones over his ears, writing down a message.

The officer watched the operator. They are coming, he thought. Cold, wet and afraid they are marching at us. He shivered and shut his eyes.

He opened them quickly. Visions fill his darkened pupils-of curling smoke, flaming men, unimaginable horrors that shape themselves without words or pictures.

"Sir," said the operator, "from advance observation post. Enemy forces sighted."

The officer got up, walked over to the operator and took the message. He read it, face blank, mouth parenthesized. "Yes," he said.

He turned on his heel and went to the door. He opened it and went into the next room. The seven girls stopped talking. Silence breathed on the walls.

The officer stood with his back to the plastic window. "Enemies," he said, "two miles away. Right in front of you."

He turned and pointed out the window. "Right out there. Two miles away. Any questions?"

A girl giggled.

"Any vehicles?" another asked.

"Yes. Five trucks, five small command cars, two tanks."

"That's too easy," laughed the girl, slender fingers fussing with her hair.

"That's all," said the officer. He started from the room. "Go to it," he added and, under his breath, "Monsters!"

He left.

"Oh, me," sighed one of the girls, "here we go again."

"What a bore," said another. She opened her delicate mouth and plucked out chewing gum. She put it under her chair seat.

"At least it stopped raining," said a redhead, tying her shoelaces.

The seven girls looked around at each other. *Are you ready?* said their eyes. *I'm ready, I suppose.* They adjusted themselves on the chairs with girlish grunts and sighs. They hooked their feet around the legs of their chairs. All gum was placed in storage. Mouths were tightened into prudish fixity. The pretty little girls made ready for the game.

Finally they were silent on their chairs. One of them took a deep breath. So did another. They all tensed their milky flesh and clasped fragile fingers together. One quickly scratched her head to get it over with. Another sneezed prettily.

"Now," said a girl on the right end of the row.

Seven pairs of beady eyes shut. Seven innocent little minds began to picture, to visualize, to transport.

Lips rolled into thin gashes, faces drained of colour, bodies shivered

passionately. Their fingers twitching with concentration, seven pretty little girls fought a war.

The men were coming over the rise of a hill when the attack came. The leading men, feet poised for the next step, burst into flame.

There was no time to scream. Their rifles slapped down into the muck, their eyes were lost in fire. They stumbled a few steps and fell, hissing and charred, into the soft mud.

Men yelled. The ranks broke. They began to throw up their weapons and fire at the night. More troops puffed incandescently, flared up, were dead.

"Spread out!" screamed an officer as his gesturing fingers sprouted flame and his face went up in licking yellow heat.

The men looked everywhere. Their dumb terrified eyes searched for an enemy. They fired into the fields and woods. They shot each other. They broke into flopping runs over the mud.

A truck was enveloped in fire. Its driver leaped out, a two-legged torch. The truck went bumping over the road, turned, wove crazily over the field, crashed into a tree, exploded and was eaten up in blazing light. Black shadows flitted in and out of the aura of light around the flames. Screams rent the night.

Man after man burst into flame, fell crashing on his face in the mud. Spots of searing light lashed the wet darkness-screams-running coals, sputtering, glowing, dying-incendiary ranks-trucks cremated-tanks blowing up.

A little blonde, her body tense with repressed excitement. Her lips twitch, a giggle hovers in her throat. Her nostrils dilate. She shudders in giddy fright. She imagines, imagines... ...

A soldier runs headlong across a field, screaming, his eyes insane with horror. A gigantic boulder rushes at him from the black sky.

His body is driven into the earth, mangled. From the rock edge, fingertips protrude.

The boulder lifts from the ground, crashes down again, a shapeless trip hammer. A flaming truck is flattened. The boulder flies again to the black sky.

A pretty brunette, her face a feverish mask. Wild thoughts tumble through her virginal brain. Her scalp grows taut with ecstatic fear. Her lips draw back from clenching teeth. A gasp of terror hisses from her lips. She imagines, imagines. ...

A soldier falls to his knees. His head jerks back. In the light of burning comrades, he stares dumbly at the white foamed wave that towers over him.

It crashes down, sweeps his body over the muddy earth, fills his lungs with salt water. The tidal wave roars over the field, drowns a hundred flaming men, tosses their corpses in the air with thundering whitecaps.

Suddenly the water stops, flies into a million pieces and disintegrates.
A lovely little redhead, hands drawn under her chin in tight bloodless fists. Her lips tremble, a throb of delight expands her chest. Her white throat contracts, she gulps in a breath of air. Her nose wrinkles with dreadful joy. She imagines, imagines...

A running soldier collides with a lion. He cannot see in the darkness. His hands strike wildly at the shaggy mane. He clubs with his rifle butt.

A scream. His face is torn off with one blow of thick claws. A jungle roar billows in the night.

A red-eyed elephant tramples wildly through the mud, picking up men in its thick trunk, hurling them through the air, mashing them under driving black columns.

Wolves bound from the darkness, spring, tear at throats. Gorillas scream and bounce in the mud, leap at falling soldiers.

A rhinoceros, leather skin glowing in the light of living torches, crashes into a burning tank, wheels, thunders into blackness, is gone.

Fangs-claws-ripping teeth-shrieks-trumpeting-roars. The sky rains snakes.

Silence. Vast brooding silence. Not a breeze, not a drop of rain, not a grumble of distant thunder. The battle is ended.

Gray morning mist rolls over the burned, the torn, the drowned, the crushed, the poisoned, the sprawling dead.

Motionless trucks-silent tanks, wisps of oily smoke still rising from their shattered hulks. Great death covering the field. Another battle in another war.

Victory-everyone is dead.

The girls stretched languidly. They extended their arms and rotated their round shoulders. Pink lips grew wide in pretty little yawns. They looked at each other and tittered in embarrassment. Some of them blushed. A few looked guilty.

Then they all laughed out loud. They opened more gum-packs, drew compacts from pockets, spoke intimately with schoolgirl whispers, with late-night dormitory whispers.

Muted giggles rose up fluttering in the warm room.

"Aren't we awful?" one of them said, powdering her pert nose.

Later they all went downstairs and had breakfast.

6 - MAD HOUSE

He sits down at his desk. He picks up a long, yellow pencil and starts to write on a pad. The lead point breaks.

The ends of his lips turn down. The eye pupils grow small in the hard mask of his face. Quietly, mouth pressed into an ugly, lipless gash, he picks up the pencil sharpener.

He grinds off the shavings and tosses the sharpener back in the drawer. Once more he starts to write. As he does so, the point snaps again and the lead rolls across the paper.

Suddenly his face becomes livid. Wild rage clamps the muscles of his body. He yells at the pencil, curses it with a stream of outrage. He glares at it with actual hate. He breaks it in two with a brutal snap and flings it into the wastebasket with a triumphant, "There! See how you like it in *there!*"

He sits tensely on the chair, his eyes wide, his lips trembling. He shakes with a frenzied wrath; it sprays his insides with acid.

The pencil lies in the wastebasket, broken and still. It is wood, lead, metal, rubber; all dead, without appreciation of the burning fury it has caused.

And yet...

He is quietly standing by the window, peering out at the street. He is letting the tightness sough away. He does not hear the rustle in the wastebasket which ceases immediately.

Soon his body is normal again. He sits down. He uses a fountain pen.

He sits down before his typewriter.

He inserts a sheet of paper and begins tapping on the keys.

His fingers are large. He hits two keys at once. The two strikers are jammed together. They stand in the air, hovering impotently over the black ribbon.

He reaches over in disgust and slaps them back. They separate, flap back into their separate berths. He starts typing again.

He hits a wrong key. The start of a curse falls from his lips, unfinished. He snatches up the round eraser and rubs the unwanted letter from the sheet of paper.

He drops the eraser and starts to type again. The paper has shifted on the roller. The next sentences are on a level slightly above the original. He clenches a fist, ignores the mistake.

The machine sticks. His shoulders twitch, he slams a fist on the space bar with a loud curse. The carriage jumps, the bell tinkles. He shoves the carriage over and it crashes to a halt.

He types faster. Three keys stick together. He clenches his teeth and whines in helpless fury. He smacks the type arms. They will not come apart. He forces

them to separate with bent, shaking fingers. They fall away. He sees that his fingers are smudged with ink. He curses out loud, trying to outrage the very air for revenge on the stupid machine.

Now he hits the keys brutally, fingers falling like the stiff claws of a derrick. Another mistake, he erases savagely. He types still faster. Four keys stick together.

He screams.

He slams his fist on the machine. He clutches at the paper and rips it from the machine in jagged pieces. He welds the fragments in his fist and hurls the crumpled ball across the room. He beats the carriage over and slams the cover down on the machine.

He jumps up and glares down.

"You fool!" he shouts with a bitter, revolted voice. "You stupid, idiotic, asinine fool!"

Scorn drips from his voice. He keeps talking, he drives himself into a craze.

"You're no damn good. You're no damn good at all. I'm going to break you in pieces. I'm going to crack you into splinters, melt you, *kill* you! You stupid, moronic, lousy goddamn machine!"

He quivers as he yells. And he wonders, deep in the self-isolated recesses of his mind whether he is killing himself with anger, whether he is destroying his system with fury.

He turns and stalks away. He is too outraged to notice the cover of the machine slip down and hear the slight whirring of metal such as he might hear if the keys trembled in their slots.

He is shaving. The razor will not cut. Or the razor is too sharp and cuts too much.

Both times a muffled curse billows through his lips. He hurls the razor on the floor and kicks it against the wall.

He is cleaning his teeth. He draws the fine silk floss between his teeth. It shreds off. A fuzzy bit remains in the gap. He tries to press another piece down to get that bit out. He cannot force the white thread down. It snaps in his fingers.

He screams. He screams at the man in the mirror and draws back his hand, throws the floss away violently. It hits the wall.

It hangs there and waves in the rush of angry breeze from the man.

He has torn another piece of floss from the container. He is giving the dental floss another chance. He is holding back his fury. If the floss knows what is good for it, it will plunge down between the teeth and draw out the shredded bit

immediately.

It does. The man is mollified. The systematic juices leave off bubbling, the fires sink, the coals are scattered.

But the anger is still there, apart. Energy is never lost; a primal law.

He is eating.

His wife places a steak before him. He picks up the knife and fork and slices. The meat is tough, the blade is dull.

A spot of red puffs up in the flesh of his cheeks. His eyes narrow. He draws the knife through the meat. The blade will not sever the browned flesh.

His eyes widen. Withheld tempest tightens and shakes him. He saws at the meat as though to give it one last opportunity to yield.

The meat will not yield.

He howls. "*God damn it!*" White teeth jam together. The knife is hurled across the room.

The woman appears, alarm etching transient scars on her forehead. Her husband is beyond himself. Her husband is shooting poison through his arteries. Her husband is releasing another cloud of animal temper. It is mist that clings. It hangs over the furniture, drips from the walls.

It is alive.

So through the days and nights. His anger falling like frenzied axe blows in his house, on everything he owns. Sprays of teeth-grinding hysteria clouding his windows and falling to his floors. Oceans of wild, uncontrolled hate flooding through every room of his house; filling each iota of space with a shifting, throbbing life.

He lay on his back and stared at the sun-mottled ceiling.

The last day, he told himself. The phrase had been creeping in and out of his brain since he'd awakened.

In the bathroom he could hear the water running. He could hear the medicine cabinet being opened and then closed again. He could hear the sound of her slippers shuffling on the tile floor.

Sally, he thought, don't leave me.

"I'll take it easy if you stay," he promised the air in a whisper.

But he knew he couldn't take it easy. That was too hard. It was easier to fly off the handle, easier to scream and rant and attack.

He turned on his side and stared out into the hall at the bathroom door. He could see the line of light under the door. Sally is in there, he thought. Sally, my wife, whom I married many years ago when I was young and full of hope.

He closed his eyes suddenly and clenched his fists. It came on him again. The sickness that prevailed with more violence every time he contracted it. The

sickness of despair, of lost ambition. It ruined everything. It cast a vapour of bitterness over all his comings and goings. It jaded appetite, ruined sleep, destroyed affection.

"Perhaps if we'd had children," he muttered and knew before he said it that it wasn't the answer.

Children. How happy they would be watching their wretched father sinking deeper into his pit of introspective fever each day.

All right, tortured his mind, let's have the facts. He gritted his teeth and tried to make his mind a blank. But, like a dull-eyed idiot, his mind repeated the words that he muttered often in his sleep through restless, tossing nights.

I'm forty years old. I teach English at Fort College. Once I had hoped to be a writer. I thought this would be a fine place to write. I would teach class part of the day and write with the rest of my time. I met Sally at school and married her. I thought everything would be just fine. I thought success was inevitable. Eighteen years ago.

Eighteen years.

How, he thought, did you mark the passing of almost two decades? The time seemed a shapeless lump of failing efforts, of nights spent in anguish; of the secret, the answer, the revelation always being withheld from him. Dangled overhead like cheese swinging in a maddening arc over the head of a berserk rat.

And resentment creeping. Days spent watching Sally buy food and clothing and pay rent with his meagre salary. Watching her buy new curtains or new chair covers and feeling a stab of pain every time because he was that much farther removed from the point where he could devote his time to writing. Every penny she spent he felt like a blow at his aspirations.

He forced himself to think that way. He forced himself to believe that it was only the time he needed to do good writing.

But once a furious student had yelled at him, "You're just a third-rate talent hiding behind a desk!"

He remembered that. Oh, God, how he remembered that moment. Remembered the cold sickness that had convulsed him when those words hit his brain. Recalled the trembling and the shaky unreason of his voice.

He had failed the student for the semester despite good marks. There had been a great to-do about it. The student's father had come to the school. They had all gone before Dr. Ramsay, the head of the English Department.

He remembered that too; the scene could crowd out all other memories. Him, sitting on one side of the conference table, facing the irate father and son. Dr. Ramsay stroking his beard until he thought he'd hurl something at him. Dr.

Ramsay had said-well let's see if we can't straighten out this matter.

They had consulted the record book and found the student was right. Dr. Ramsay had looked up at him in great surprise. Well, I can't see what... he had said and let his syrupy voice break off and looked probingly at him, waiting for an explanation.

And the explanation had been hopeless, a jumbled and pointless affair. Irresponsible attitude, he had said, flaunting of unpardonable behavior; morally a failure. And Dr. Ramsay, his thick neck getting red, telling him in no uncertain terms that morals were not subject to the grading system at Fort College.

There was more but he'd forgotten it. He'd made an effort to forget it. But he couldn't forget that it would be years before he made a professorship. Ramsay would hold it back. And his salary would go on being insufficient and bills would mount and he would never get his writing done.

He regained the present to find himself clutching the sheets with taut fingers. He found himself glaring in hate at the bathroom door. Go on!-his mind snapped vindictively-Go home to your precious mother. See if I care. Why just a trial separation? Make it permanent. Give me some peace. Maybe I can do some writing then.

Maybe I can do some writing then.

The phrase made him sick. It had no meaning anymore. Like a word that is repeated until it becomes gibberish that sentence, for him, had been used to extinction. It sounded silly; like some bit of cliché from a soap opera. Hero saying in dramatic tones-Now, by God, maybe I can do some writing. Senseless.

For a moment, though, he wondered if it was true. Now that she was leaving could he forget about her and really get some work done? Quit his job? Go somewhere and hole up in a cheap furnished room and write?

You have \$123.89 in the bank, his mind informed him. He pretended it was the only thing that kept him from it. But, far back in his mind, he wondered if he could write anywhere. Often the question threw itself at him when he was least expecting it. You have four hours every morning, the statement would rise like a menacing wraith. You have time to write many thousands of words. Why don't you?

And the answer was always lost in a tangle of because and wells and endless reasons that he clung to like a drowning man at straws.

The bathroom door opened and she came out, dressed in her good red suit.

For no reason at all, it seemed, he suddenly realized that she'd been wearing that same outfit for more than three years and never a new one. The realization angered him even more. He closed his eyes and hoped she wasn't looking at him.

I hate her, he thought. I hate her because she has destroyed my life.

He heard the rustle of her skirt as she sat at the dressing table and pulled out a drawer. He kept his eyes shut and listened to the Venetian blinds tap lightly against the window frame as morning breeze touched them. He could smell her perfume floating lightly on the air.

And he tried to think of the house empty all the time. He tried to think of coming home from class and not finding Sally there waiting for him. The idea seemed, somehow, impossible. And that angered him. Yes, he thought, she's gotten to me. She's worked on me until I am so dependent of her for really unessential things that I suffer under the delusion that I cannot do without her.

He turned suddenly on the mattress and looked at her.

"So, you're really going," he said in a cold voice.

She turned briefly and looked at him. There was no anger on her face. She looked tired... "Yes," she said. "I'm going."

Good riddance. The words tried to pass his lips. He cut them off.

"I suppose you have your reasons," he said.

Her shoulders twitched a moment in what he took for a shrug of weary amusement.

"I have no intention of arguing with you," he said. "Your life is your own."

"Thank you," she murmured.

She's waiting for apologies, he thought. Waiting to be told that he didn't hate her as he'd said. That he hadn't struck *her* but all his twisted and shattered hopes; the mocking spectacle of his own lost faith.

"And just how long is this *trial* separation going to last?" he said, his voice acidulous.

She shook her head.

"I don't know, Chris," she said quietly. "It's up to you."

"Up to me," he said. "It's always up to me, isn't it?"

"Oh, please darl-Chris. I don't want to argue anymore. I'm too tired to argue."

"It's easier to just pack and run away."

She turned and looked at him. Her eyes were very dark and unhappy.

"Run away?" she said. "After eighteen years you accuse me of that? Eighteen years of watching you destroy yourself. And me along with you. Oh, don't look surprised. I'm sure you know you've driven me half insane too."

She turned away and he saw her shoulders twitch. She brushed some tears from her eyes.

"It's n-not just because you hit me," she said. "You kept saying that last night when I said I was leaving. Do you think it would matter if..." She took a deep

breath. "If it meant you were angry with me? If it was that I could be hit every day. But you didn't hit me. I'm nothing to you. I'm not wanted."

"Oh, stop being so..."

"No," she broke in. "That's why I'm going. Because I can't bear to watch you hate me more every day for something that... that isn't my fault."

"I suppose you..."

"Oh, don't say anymore," she said, getting up. She hurried out of the room and he heard her walk into the living room. He stared at the dressing table.

Don't say anymore?-his mind asked as though she were still there. Well, there's more to say; lots more. You don't seem to realize what I've lost. You don't seem to understand. I had hopes, oh God, what hopes I had. I was going to write prose to make the people sit up and gasp. I was going to tell them things they needed badly to know. I was going to tell them in so entertaining a way that they would never realize that the truth was getting to them. I was going to create immortal works.

Now when I die, I shall only be dead. I am trapped in this depressing village, entombed in a college of science where men gape at dust and do not even know that there are stars above their heads. And what can I do, what can...?

The thoughts broke off. He looked miserably at her perfume bottles, at the powder box that tinkled "Always" when the cover was lifted off.

I'll remember you. Always.

With a heart that's true. Always.

The words are childish and comical, he thought. But his throat contracted and he felt himself shudder.

"Sally," he said. So quietly that he could hardly hear it himself.

After a while he got up and dressed.

While he was putting on his trousers a rug slid from under him and he had to grab the dresser for support. He glared down, heart pounding in the total fury he had learned to summon in the space of seconds.

"Damn you," he muttered.

He forgot Sally. He forgot everything. He just wanted to get even with the rug. He kicked it violently under the bed. The anger plunged down and disappeared. He shook his head. I'm sick, he thought. He thought of going in to her and telling her he was sick.

His mouth tightened as he went into the bathroom. I'm not sick, he thought. Not in body anyway. It's my mind that's ill and she only makes it worse.

The bathroom was still damply warm from her use of it. He opened the window a trifle and got a splinter in his finger. He cursed the window in a muffled voice. He looked up. Why so quiet? he asked. So *she* won't hear me?

"Damn you!" he snarled loudly at the window. And he picked at his finger until he had pulled out the sliver of wood.

He jerked at the cabinet door. It stuck. His face reddened. He pulled harder and the door flew open and cracked him on the wrist. He spun about and grabbed his wrist, threw back his head with a whining gasp. *

He stood there, eyes clouded with pain, staring at the ceiling. He looked at the crack that ran in a crazy meandering line across the ceiling. Then he closed his eyes.

And began to sense something. Intangible. A sense of menace. He wondered about it. Why it's myself, of course, he answered then. It is the moral decrepitude of my own subconscious. It is bawling out to me, saying: You are to be punished for driving your poor wife away to her mother's arms. You are not a man. You are a-

"Oh, shut up," he said.

He washed his hands and face. He ran an inspecting finger over his chin. He needed a shave. He opened the cabinet door gingerly and took out his straight razor. He held it up and looked at it.

The handle has expanded. He told himself that quickly as the blade appeared to fall out of the handle wilfully. It made him shiver to see it flop out like that and glitter in the light from the cabinet light fixture.

He stared in repelled fascination at the bright steel. He touched the blade edge. So sharp, he thought. The slightest touch would sever flesh. What a hideous thing it was.

'It's my hand.'

He said it involuntarily and shut the razor suddenly. It was his hand, it had to be. It couldn't have been the razor moving by itself. That was sick imagination.

But he didn't shave. He put the razor back in the cabinet with a vague sense of forestalling doom.

Don't care if we *are* expected to shave every day, he muttered. I'm not taking a chance on my hand slipping. I'd better get a safety razor anyway. This kind isn't for me, I'm too nervous.

Suddenly, impelled by those words, the picture of him eighteen years before flew into his brain.

He remembered a date he'd had with Sally. He remembered telling her he was so calm it was akin to being dead. Nothing bothers me, he'd said. And it was true, at the time. He remembered too telling her he didn't like coffee, that one cup kept him awake at night. That he didn't smoke, didn't like the taste or smell. I like to stay healthy, he'd said. He remembered the exact words.

"And now," he muttered at his lean and worn reflection.

Now he drank gallons of coffee a day. Until it sloshed like a black pool in his stomach and he couldn't sleep any more than he could fly. Now he smoked endless strings of finger-yellowing cigarettes until his throat felt raw and clogged, until he couldn't write in pencil because his hand shook so much.

But all that stimulation didn't help his writing any. Paper still remained blank in the typewriter. Words never came, plots died on him. Characters eluded him, mocking him with laughter from behind the veil of their non-creation.

And time passed. It flew by faster and faster, seeming to single him out for highest punishment. He-a man who had begun to value time so, neurotically that it overbalanced his life and made him sick to think of its passing.

As he brushed his teeth he tried to recall when this irrational temper had first begun to control him. But there was no way of tracing its course. Somewhere in mists that could not be pierced, it had started. With a word of petulance, an angry contraction of muscles. With a glare of unrecallable animosity.

And from there, like a swelling amoeba, it had gone its own perverted and downward course of evolution, reaching its present nadir in him; a taut embittered man who found his only solace in hating.

He spit out white froth and rinsed his mouth. As he put down the glass, it cracked and a barb of glass drove into his hand.

"Damn!" he yelled.

He spun on his heel and clenched his fist. It sprang open instantly as the sliver sank into his palm. He stood with tears on his cheeks, breathing heavily. He thought of Sally listening to him, hearing once more the audible evidence of his snapping nerves.

Stop it!-he ordered himself. You can never do anything until you rid yourself of this enervating temper.

He closed his eyes. For a moment he wondered why it seemed that everything was happening to him lately. As if some revenging power had taken roost in the house, pouring a savage life into inanimate things. Threatening him. But the thought was just a faceless, passing figure in the crushing horde of thoughts that mobbed past his mind's eye; seen but not appreciated.

He drew the glass sliver from his palm. He put on his dark tie.

Then he went into the dining room, consulting his watch. It was ten thirty already. More than half the morning was gone.

More than half the time for sitting and trying to write the prose that would make people sit up and gasp.

It happened that way more often now than he would even admit to himself.

Sleeping late, making up errands, doing anything to forestall the terrible moment when he must sit down before his typewriter and try to wrench some harvest from the growing desert of his mind.

It was harder every time. And he grew more angry every time; and hated more. And never noticed until now, when it was too late, that Sally had grown desperate and could no longer stand his temper or his hate.

She was sitting at the kitchen table drinking dark coffee. She too drank more than she once had. Like him, she drank it black, without sugar. It jangled her nerves too. And she smoked now although she'd never smoked until a year before. She got no pleasure from it. She drew the fumes deep down into her lungs and then blew them out quickly. And her hands shook almost as badly as his did.

He poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down across from her. She started to get up.

"What's the matter? Can't you stand the sight of me?"

She sat back and took a deep pull on the cigarette in her hand. Then she stamped it out on the saucer.

He felt sick. He wanted to get out of the house suddenly. It felt alien and strange to him. He had the feeling that she had renounced all claim to it, that she had retreated from it. The touch of her fingers and the loving indulgences she had bestowed on every room; all these things were taken back. They had lost tangibility because she was leaving. She was deserting it and it was not their home anymore. He felt it strongly.

Sinking back against the chair he pushed away his cup and stared at the yellow oilcloth on the table. He felt as if he and Sally were frozen in time; that seconds were drawn out like some fantastic taffy until each one seemed an eternity. The clock ticked slower. And the house was a different house.

"What train are you getting?" he asked, knowing before he spoke that there was only one morning train.

"Eleven forty-seven," she said.

When she said it, he felt as if his stomach were pulled back hard against his backbone. He gasped, so actual was the physical pain. She glanced up at him.

"Burned myself," he said hastily, and she got up and put her cup and saucer in the sink.

Why did I say that?-he thought. Why couldn't I say that I gasped because I was filled with terror at the thought of her leaving me? Why do I always say the things I don't mean to say? I'm not bad. But every time I speak I build higher the walls of hatred and bitterness around me until I cannot escape from them.

With words I have knit my shroud and will bury myself therein.

He looked at her back and a sad smile raised his lips. I can think of words when my wife is leaving me. It is very sad.

Sally had walked out of the kitchen. His mind reverted to its sullen attitude. This is a game we're playing. Follow the leader. You walk in one room, head high, the justified spouse, the injured party. I am supposed to follow, slope shouldered and contrite, pouring out apologetic hecatombs.

Once more conscious of himself, he sat tensely at the table, rage making his body tremble. Consciously he relaxed and pressed his left hand over his eyes. He sat there trying to lose his misery in silence and blackness.

It wouldn't work.

And then his cigarette really burned him and he sat erect. The cigarette hit the floor scattering ashes. He bent over and picked it up. He threw it at the waste can and missed. To hell with it, he thought. He got up and dumped his cup and saucer in the sink. The saucer broke in half and nicked his right thumb. He let it bleed. He didn't care.

She was in the extra room finishing her packing.

The extra room. The words tortured him now. When had they stopped calling it "the nursery"? When had it begun to eat her insides out because she was so full of love and wanted children badly? When had he begun to replace this loss with nothing better than volcanic temper and days and nights of sheath-scraped nerves?

He stood in the doorway and watched her. He wanted to get out the typewriter and sit down and write reams of words. He wanted to glory in his coming freedom. Think of all the money he could save. Think of how soon he could go away and write all the things he'd always meant to write.

He stood in the doorway, sick.

Is all this possible?-his mind asked, incredulous. Possible that she was leaving? But she and he were man and wife. They had lived and loved in this house for more than eighteen years. Now she was leaving. Putting articles of clothing in her old black suitcase and leaving. He couldn't reconcile himself to that. He couldn't understand it or ally it with the functions of the day. Where did it fit into the pattern?-the pattern that was Sally right there cleaning and cooking and trying to make their home happy and warm.

He shivered and, turning abruptly, went back into the bedroom.

He slumped on the bed and stared at the delicately whirring electric clock on their bedside table.

Past eleven, he saw. In less than an hour I have to hold class for a group of idiot

freshmen. And, on the desk in the living room, is a mountain of mid-term examinations with essays that I must suffer through, feeling my stomach turn at their paucity of intelligence, their adolescent phraseology.

And all that tripe, all those miles of hideous prose, had been wound into an eternal skein in his head. And there it sat unravelling into his own writing until he wondered if he could stand the thought of living anymore. I have digested the worst, he thought. Is it any wonder that I exude it piecemeal?

Temper began again, a low banking fire in him, gradually fanned by further thinking. I've done no writing this morning. Like every morning after every other morning as time passes. I do less and less. I write nothing. Or I write worthless material. I could write better when I was twenty than I can now.

I'll *never* write anything good!

He jolted to his feet and his head snapped around as he looked for something to strike at, something to break, something to hate with such hate that it would wither in the blast.

It seemed as though the room clouded. He felt a throbbing. His left leg banged against a corner of the bed.

He gasped in fury. He wept. Tears of hate and repentance and self commiseration. I'm lost, he thought. Lost. There is nothing.

He became very calm, icy calm. Drained of pity, of emotion. He put on his suit coat. He put on his hat and got his briefcase off the dresser.

He stopped before the door to the room where she still fussed with her bag. So she will have something to occupy herself with now, he thought, so she won't have to look at me. He felt his heart thudding like a heavy drum beat.

"Have a nice time at your mother's," he said dispassionately.

She looked up and saw the expression on his face. She turned away and put a hand to her eyes. He felt a sudden need to run to her and beg her forgiveness. Make everything right again.

Then he thought again of papers and years of writing undone. He turned away and walked across the living room. The small rug slipped a little and it helped to focus the strength of anger he needed. He kicked it aside and it fluttered against the wall in a rumpled heap.

He slammed the door behind him.

His mind gibbered. Now, soap opera like, she has thrown herself on the coverlet and is weeping tears of martyr-tinged sorrow. Now she is digging nails into the pillow and moaning my name and wishing she were dead.

His shoes clicked rapidly on the sidewalk. God help me, he thought. God help all us poor wretches who would create and find that we must lose our hearts for it because we cannot afford to spend our time at it.

It was a beautiful day. His eyes saw that but his mind would not attest to it. The trees were thick with green and the air warm and fresh. Spring breezes flooded down the streets. He felt them brush over him as he walked down the block, crossed Main Street to the bus stop.

He stood there on the corner looking back at the house.

She is in there, his mind persisted in analysis. In there, the house in which we've lived for more than eight years. She is packing or crying or doing something. And soon she will call the Campus Cab Company. A cab will come driving out. The driver will honk the horn, Sally will put on her light spring coat and take her suitcase out on the porch. She will lock the door behind her for the last time.

"No--"

He couldn't keep the word from strangling in his throat. He kept staring at the house. His head ached. He saw everything weaving. I'm sick, he thought.

"I'm sick!"

He shouted it. There was no one around to hear. He stood gazing at the house. She is going away forever, said his mind.

Very well then! I'll write, write, write. He let the words soak into his mind and displace all else.

A man had a choice, after all. He devoted his life to his work or to his wife and children and home. It could not be combined; not in this day and age. In this insane world where God was second to income and goodness to wealth.

He glanced aside as the green-striped bus topped the distant hill and approached. He put the briefcase under his arm and reached into his coat pocket for a token. There was a hole in the pocket. Sally had been meaning to sew it. Well, she would never sew it now. What did it matter anyway?

I would rather have my soul intact than the suit of clothes I wear.

Words, words, he thought, as the bus stopped before him. They flood through me now that she is leaving. Is that evidence that it is her presence that clogs the channels of thought?

He dropped the token in the coin box and weaved down the length of the bus. He passed a professor he knew and nodded to him distractedly. He slumped down on the back seat and stared at the grimy, rubberized floor boards.

This is a great life, his mind ranted. I am so pleased with this, my life and these, my great and noble accomplishments.

He opened the briefcase a moment and looked in at the thick prospectus he had outlined with the aid of Dr. Ramsay.

First week-1. *Everyman*. Discussion of. Reading of selections from *Classic Readings For College Freshmen*. 2. *Beowulf*. Reading of. Class discussion.

Twenty minute quotation quiz.

He shoved the sheaf of papers back into the briefcase. It sickens me, he thought. I hate these things. The classics have become anathema to me. I begin to loathe the very mention of them. Chaucer, the Elizabethan poets, Dryden, Pope, Shakespeare. What higher insult to a man than to grow to hate these names because he must share them by part with unappreciative clods? Because he must strain them thin and make them palatable for the dullards who should better be digging ditches.

He got off the bus downtown and started down the long slope of Ninth Street.

Walking, he felt as though he were a ship with its hawser cut, prey to a twisted network of currents. He felt apart from the city, the country, the world. If someone told me I were a ghost, he thought, I would be inclined to believe.

What is she doing now?

He wondered about it as the buildings floated past him. What is she thinking as I stand here and the town of Fort drifts by me like vaporous stage flats? What are her hands holding? What expression has she on her lovely face?

She is alone in the house, our house. What might have been our *home*. Now it is only a shell, a hollow box with sticks of wood and metal for furnishings. Nothing but inanimate dead matter.

No matter what John Morton said.

Him with his gold leaves parting and his test tubes and his God of the microscope. For all his erudite talk and his papers of slideruled figures; despite all that-it was simple witchcraft he professed. It was idiocy. The idiocy that prompted that ass Charles Fort to burden the world with his nebulous fancies. The idiocy that made that fool of a millionaire endow this place and from the arid soil erect these huge stone structures and house within a zoo of wild-eyed scientists always searching for some fashion of elixir while the rest of the clowns blew the world out from under them.

No, there is nothing right with the world, he thought as he plodded under the arch and onto the wide, green campus.

He looked across at the huge Physical Sciences Centre, its granite face beaming in the late morning sun.

Now she is calling the cab. He consulted his watch. No. She is in the cab already. Riding through the silent streets. Past the houses and down into the shopping district. Past the red brick buildings spewing out yokels and students. Through the town that was a potpourri of the sophisticated and the rustic.

Now the cab was turning left on Tenth Street. Now it was pulling up the hill, topping it. Gliding down toward the railroad station. Now...

"Chris!"

His head snapped around and his body twitched in surprise. He looked toward the wide-doored entrance to the Mental Sciences Building. Dr. Morton was coming out.

We attended school together eighteen years ago, he thought. But I took only a small interest in science. I preferred wasting my time on the culture of the centuries. That's why I'm an associate and he's a doctor and the head of his department.

All this fled like racing winds through his mind as Dr. Morton approached, smiling. He clapped Chris on the shoulder.

"Hello there," he said. "How are things?"

"How are they ever?"

Dr. Morton's smile faded.

"What is it, Chris?" he asked.

I won't tell you about Sally, Chris thought. Not if I die first. You'll never know it from me.

"The usual," he said.

"Still on the outs with Ramsay?"

Chris shrugged. Morton looked over at the large clock on the face of the Mental Sciences Building.

"Say, look," he said. "Why are we standing here? Your class isn't for a half hour yet, is it?"

Chris didn't answer. He's going to invite me for coffee, he thought. He's going to regale me with more of his inane theories. He's going to use me as whipping boy for his mental merry-go-round.

"Let's get some coffee," Morton said, taking Chris's arm. They walked along in silence for a few steps.

"How's Sally?" Morton asked then.

"She's fine," he answered in an even voice.

"Good. Oh, incidentally. I'll probably drop by tomorrow or the next day for that book I left there last Thursday night."

"All right."

"What were you saying about Ramsay now?"

"I wasn't."

Morton skipped that. "Been thinking anymore about what I told you?" he asked.

"If you're referring to your fairy tale about my house-no. I haven't been giving it any more thought than it deserves-which is none."

They turned the corner of the building and walked toward Ninth Street.

"Chris, that's an indefensible attitude," Morton said. "You have no right to doubt when you don't know."

Chris felt like pulling his arm away, turning and leaving Morton standing there. He was sick of words and words and words. He wanted to be alone. He almost felt as if he could put a pistol to his head now, get it over with. Yes, I could-he thought. If someone handed it to me now it would be done in a moment.

They went up the stone steps to the sidewalk and crossed over to the Campus Cafe. Morton opened the door and ushered Chris in. Chris went in back and slid into a wooden booth.

Morton brought two coffees and sat across from him.

"Now listen," he said, stirring in sugar, "I'm your best friend. At least I regard myself as such. And I'm damned if I'll sit by like a mute and watch you kill yourself."

Chris felt his heart jump. He swallowed. He got rid of the thoughts as though they were visible to Morton.

"Forget it," he said. "I don't care what proofs you have. I don't believe any of it."

"What'll it take to convince you, damn it?" Morton said. "Do you have to lose your life first?"

"Look," Chris said pettishly. "I don't believe it. That's *it*. Forget it now, let it go."

"Listen, Chris, I can show you..."

"You can show me nothing!" Chris cut in.

Morton was patient. "It's a recognized phenomenon," he said.

Chris looked at him in disgust and shook his head.

"What dreams you white frocked kiddies have in the sanctified cloister of your laboratories. You can make yourself believe anything after a while. As long as you can make up a measurement for it."

"Will you listen to me, Chris? How many times have you complained to me about splinters, about closet doors flying open, about rugs slipping? How many times?"

"Oh, for God's sake, don't start *that* again. I'll get up and walk out of here. I'm in no mood for your lectures. Save them for those poor idiots who pay tuition to hear them."

Morton looked at him with a shake of his head.

"I wish I could get to you," he said.

"Forget it."

"Forget it?" Morton squirmed. "Can't you see that you're in danger because of your temper?"

"I'm telling you, John..."

"Where do you think that temper of yours goes? Do you think it disappears? No. It doesn't. It goes into your rooms and into your furniture and into the air. It goes into Sally. It makes everything sick; including you. It crowds you out. It welds a link between animate and inanimate. *Psychobolie*. Oh, don't look so

petulant; like a child who can't stand to hear the word *spinach*. Sit down, for God's sake. You're an adult; listen like one."

Chris lit a cigarette. He let Morton's voice drift into a non-intelligent hum. He glanced at the wall clock. Quarter to twelve. In two minutes, if the schedule was adhered to, she would be going. The train would move and the town of Fort would pass away from her.

"I've told you any number of times," Morton was saying. "No one knows what matter is made of. Atoms, electrons, pure energy-all words. Who knows where it will end? We guess, we theorize, we make up means of measurement. But we don't know.

"And that's for matter. Think of the human brain and its still unknown capacities. It's an uncharted continent, Chris. It may stay that way for a long time. And all that time the suspected powers will still be affecting us and, maybe, affecting matter, even if we *can't* measure it on a gauge.

"And I say you're poisoning your house. I say your temper has become ingrained in the structure, in every article you touch. All of them influenced by you and your ungovernable rages. And I think too that if it weren't for Sally's presence acting as an abortive factor, well... you might actually be attacked by..."

Chris heard the last few sentences.

"Oh, stop this gibberish!" he snapped angrily. "You're talking like a juvenile after his first Tom Swift novel."

Morton sighed. He ran his fingers over the cup edge and shook his head sadly.

"Well," he said, "all I can do is hope that nothing breaks down. It's obvious to me that you're not going to listen."

"Congratulations on one statement I can agree with," said Chris. He looked at his watch. "And now if you'll excuse me I'll go and listen to saddle-shoed cretins stumble over passages they haven't the slightest ability to assimilate."

They got up.

"I'll take it," said Morton but Chris slapped a coin on the counter and walked out. Morton followed, putting his change into his pocket slowly.

In the street he patted Chris on the shoulder.

"Try to take it easy," he said. "Look, why don't you and Sally come out to the house tonight? We could have a few rounds of bridge."

"That's impossible," Chris said.

The students were reading a selection from *King Lear*. Their heads were bent over the books. He stared at them without seeing them.

I've got to resign myself to it, he told himself. I've got to forget her, that's all. She's gone. I'm not going to bewail the fact. I'm not going to hope against hope

that she'll return. I don't *want* her back. I'm better off without her. Free and unfettered now.

His thoughts drained off. He felt empty and helpless. He felt as though he could never write another word for the rest of his life. Maybe, he thought, sullenly displeased with the idea, maybe it was only the upset of her leaving that enabled my brain to find words. For, after all, the words I thought of, the ideas that nourished, though briefly, were all to do with her-her going and my wretchedness because of it.

He caught himself short. No!-he cried in silent battle. I will not let it be that way. I'm strong. This feeling is only temporary, I'll very soon have learned to do without her. And then I'll do work. Such work as I have only dreamed of doing. After all, haven't I lived eighteen years more? Haven't those years filled me to overflowing with sights and sounds, ideals, impressions, interpretations?

He trembled with excitement.

Someone was waving a hand in his face. He focused his eyes and looked coldly at the girl.

"Well?" he said.

"Could you tell us when you're going to give back our midterm papers, Professor Neal?" she asked.

He stared at her, his right cheek twitching. He felt about to hurl every invective at his command into her face. His fists closed.

"You'll get them back when they're marked," he said tensely.

"Yes, but..."

"You heard me," he said.

His voice rose at the end of the sentence. The girl sat down.

As he lowered his head he noticed that she looked at the boy next to her and shrugged her shoulders, a look of disgust on her face.

"Miss..."

He fumbled with his record book and found her name.

"Miss Forbes!"

She looked up, her features drained of colour, her red lips standing out sharply against her white skin. Painted alabaster idiot. The words clawed at him.

"You may get out of this room," he ordered sharply.

Confusion filled her face.

"Why?" she asked in a thin, plaintive voice.

"Perhaps you didn't hear me," he said, the fury rising. "I said get out of this room!"

"But..."

"Do you hear me!" he shouted.

Hurriedly she collected her books, her hands shaking, her face burning with embarrassment. She kept her eyes on the floor and her throat moved convulsively as she edged along the aisle and went out the doorway.

The door closed behind her. He sank back. He felt a terrible sickness in himself. Now, he thought, they will all turn against me in defence of an addle-witted little girl. Dr. Ramsay would have more fuel for his simple little fire.

And they were right.

He couldn't keep his mind from it. They *were* right. He knew it. In that far recess of mind which he could not cow with thoughtless passion, he knew he was a stupid fool. I have no right to teach others. I cannot even teach myself to be a human being. He wanted to cry out the words and weep confessions and throw himself from one of the open windows.

"The whispering will stop!" he demanded fiercely.

The room was quiet. He sat tensely, waiting for any signs of militance. I am your teacher, he told himself, I am to be obeyed, I am...

The concept died. He drifted away again. What were students or a girl asking about midterm papers? What was anything?

He glanced at his watch. In a few minutes the train would pull into Centralia. She would change to the main line express to Indianapolis. Then up to Detroit and her mother. Gone.

Gone. He tried to visualize the word, put it into living terms. But the thought of the house without her was almost beyond his means. Because it wasn't the house without her; it was something else.

He began to think of what John had said.

Was it possible? He was in a mood to accept the incredible. It was incredible that she had left him. Why not extend the impossibilities that were happening to him?

All right then, he thought angrily. The house is alive. I've given it this life with deadly outpourings of wrath. I hope to God that when I get back there and enter the door, the roof collapses. I hope the walls buckle and I'm crushed to pulp by the crushing weight of plaster and wood and brick. That's what I want. Some agency to do away with me. I cannot drive myself to it. If only a gun would commit my suicide for me. Or gas blow its deadly fumes at me for the asking or a razor slice my flesh upon request.

The door opened. He glanced up. Dr. Ramsay stood there, face drawn into a mask of indignation. Behind him in the hall Chris could see the girl, her face streaked with tears.

"A moment, Neal," Ramsay said sharply and stepped back into the hall again.

Chris sat at the desk staring at the door. He felt suddenly very tired, exhausted. He felt as if getting up and moving into the hall was more than he could possibly manage. He glanced at the class. A few of them were trying to repress smiles.

"For tomorrow you will finish the reading of *King Lear*," he said. Some of them groaned.

Ramsay appeared in the doorway again, his cheeks pink.

"Are you coming, Neal?" he asked loudly.

Chris felt himself tighten with anger as he walked across the room and out into the hall. The girl lowered her eyes. She stood beside Dr. Ramsay's portly frame.

"What's this I hear, Neal?" Ramsay asked.

That's right, Chris thought. Don't ever call me professor. I'll never be one, will I? You'll see to that, you bastard.

"I don't understand," he said, as coolly as possible.

"Miss Forbes here claims you ejected her from class for no reason at all."

"Then Miss Forbes is lying quite stupidly," he said. Let me hold this anger, he thought. Don't let it flood loose. He shook with holding it back.

The girl gasped and took out her handkerchief again. Ramsay turned and patted her shoulder.

"Go in my office, child. Wait for me."

She turned away slowly. Politician!-cried Neal's mind. How easy it is for you to be popular with them. You don't have to deal with their bungling minds.

Miss Forbes turned the corner and Ramsay looked back.

"Your explanation had better be good," he said. "I'm getting a little weary, Neal, of your behaviour."

Chris didn't speak. Why am I standing here?-he suddenly wondered. Why, in all the world, am I standing in this dim lit hall and, voluntarily, listening to this pompous boor berate me?

"I'm waiting, Neal."

Chris tightened. "I told you she was lying," he said quietly.

"I choose to believe otherwise," said Dr. Ramsay, his voice trembling.

A shudder ran through Chris. His head moved forward and he spoke slowly, teeth clenched.

"You can believe anything you damn well please."

Ramsay's mouth twitched.

"I think it's time you appeared before the board," he muttered.

"Fine!" said Chris loudly. Ramsay made a move to close the classroom door. Chris gave it a kick and it banged against the wall. A girl gasped.

"What's the matter?" Chris yelled. "Don't you want your students to hear me tell you off? Don't you even want them to suspect that you're a dolt, a windbag, an ass!"

Ramsay raised shaking fists before his chest. His lips trembled violently.

"This will do, Neal!" he cried.

Chris reached out and shoved the heavy man aside, snarling, "Oh, *get* out of my way!"

He started away. The hall fled past him. He heard the bell ring. It sounded as though it rang in another existence. The building throbbed with life; students poured from classrooms.

"Neal!" called Dr. Ramsay.

He kept walking. Oh, God, let me out of here, I'm suffocating, he thought. My hat, my briefcase. Leave them. Get out of here. Dizzily he descended the stairs surrounded by milling students. They swirled about him like an unidentifiable tide. His brain was far from them.

Staring ahead dully he walked along the first floor hall. He turned and went out the door and down the porch steps to the campus sidewalk. He paid no attention to the students who stared at his ruffled blond hair, his mussed clothes. He kept walking. I've done it, he thought belligerently. I've made the break. *I'm free!*

I'm sick.

All the way down to Main Street and out on the bus he kept renewing his stores of anger. He went over those few moments in the hallway again and again. He summoned up the vision of Ramsay's stolid face, repeated his words. He kept himself taut and furious. I'm glad, he told himself forcibly. Everything is solved. Sally has left me. Good. My job is done. Good. Now I'm free to do as I like. A strained and angry joy pounded through him. He felt alone, a stranger in the world and glad of it.

At his stop, he got off the bus and walked determinedly toward the house pretending to ignore the pain he felt at approaching it. It's just an empty house, he thought. Nothing more. Despite all puerile theories, it is nothing but a house.

Then, when he went in, he found her sitting on the couch.

He almost staggered as if someone had struck him. He stood dumbly, staring at her. She had her hands tightly clasped. She was looking at him.

He swallowed.

"Well," he managed to say.

"I..." Her throat contracted. "Well..."

"Well *what!*" he said quickly and loudly to hide the shaking in his voice.

She stood up. "Chris, please. Won't you... ask me to stay?" She looked at him like a little girl, pleading.

The look enraged him. All his day dreams shattered; he saw the growing thing of new ideas ground under foot.

"Ask you to stay!" he yelled at her. "By God, I'll ask you nothing!"

"Chris! Don't!"

She's buckling, cried his mind. She's cracking. Get her now. Get her out of here. Drive her from these walls!

"Chris," she sobbed, "be kind. Please be kind."

"Kind!"

He almost choked on the word. He felt a wild heat coursing his body.

"Have *you* been kind? Driving me crazy, into a pit of despair. I can't get out. Do you understand? Never. Never! Do you understand that! I'll never write. I *can't* write! You drained it out of me! You killed it! Understand *that*? Killed it!"

She backed away toward the dining room. He followed her, hands shaking at his sides, feeling that she had driven him to this confession and hating her the more for it.

"Chris," she murmured in fright.

It seemed as if his rage grew cell-like, swelling him with fury until he was nothing of bone and blood but a hating accusation made flesh.

"I don't want you!" he yelled. "You're right, I don't want you! Get out of here!"

Her eyes were wide, her mouth an open wound. Suddenly she ran past him, eyes glistening with tears. She fled through the front doorway.

He went to the window and watched her running down the block, her dark brown hair streaming behind her.

Dizzy suddenly, lie sank down on the couch and closed his eyes. He dug his nails into his palms. Oh God, I *am* sick, his mind churned.

He twitched and looked around stupidly. What was it? This feeling that he was sinking into the couch, into the floorboards, dissolving in the air, joining the molecules of the house. He whimpered softly, looking around. His head ached; he pressed a palm against his forehead.

"What?" he muttered. "What?"

He stood up. As though there were fumes he tried to smell them. As though it were a sound he tried to hear it. He turned around to see it. As though there were something with depth and length and width; something menacing.

He wavered, fell back on the couch. He stared around. There was nothing, all intangible. It might only be in the mind. The furniture lay as it did before. The sunlight filtered through the windows, piercing the gauzelike curtains, making gold patterns on the inlaid wooden floor. The walls were still creamy, the ceiling

was as it was before. Yet there was this darkening, darkening...

What?

He pushed up and walked dizzily around the room. He forgot about Sally. He was in the dining room. He touched the table, he stared at the dark oak. He went into the kitchen. He stood by the sink and looked out the window.

Far up the block, he saw her walking, stumbling. She must have been waiting for the bus. Now she couldn't wait any longer and she was walking away from the house, away from him.

"I'll go after her," he muttered.

No, he thought. No, I won't go after her like a...

He forgot like what. He stared down at the sink. He felt drunk. Everything was fuzzy on the edges.

She's washed the cups. The broken saucer was thrown away.

He looked at the nick on his thumb. It was dried. He'd forgotten about it.

He looked around suddenly as if someone had sneaked behind him. He stared at the wall. Something was rising. He felt it. It's not me. But it had to be; it had to be imagination.

Imagination!

He slammed a fist on the sink. I'll write. Write, *write*. Sit down and drain it all away in words; this feeling of anguish and terror and loneliness. Write it out of my system.

He cried, "Yes!"

He ran from the kitchen. He refused to accept the instinctive fear in himself. He ignored the menace that seemed to thicken the very air.

A rug slipped. He kicked it aside. He sat down. The air hummed. He tore off the cover on the typewriter. He sat nervously, staring at the keyboard. The moment before attack. It was in the air. But it's *my* attack!-he thought triumphantly, my attack on stupidity and fear.

He rolled a sheet into the typewriter. He tried to collect his throbbing thoughts. Write, the word called in his mind. Write- *now*.

"Now!" he cried.

He felt the desk lurch against his shins.

The flaring pain knifed open his senses. He kicked the desk in automatic frenzy. More pain. He kicked again. The desk flung back at him. He screamed.

He'd seen it move.

He tried to back off, the anger torn from him. The typewriter keys moved under his hands. His eyes swept down. He couldn't tell whether he was moving the keys or whether they moved by themselves. He pulled hysterically, trying to

dislodge his fingers but he couldn't. The keys were moving faster than his eye could see. They were a blur of motion. He felt them shredding his skin, peeling his fingers. They were raw. Blood started to ooze out.

He cried out and pulled. He managed to jerk away his fingers and jump back in the chair.

His belt buckle caught, the desk drawer came flying out. It slammed into his stomach. He yelled again. The pain was a black cloud pouring over his head.

He threw down a hand to shove in the drawer. He saw the yellow pencils lying there. They glared. His hand slipped, it banged into the drawer.

One of the pencils jabbed at him.

He always kept the points sharp. It was like the bite of a snake. He snapped back his hand with a gasp of pain. The point was jammed under a nail. It was imbedded in raw, tender flesh. He cried out in fury and pain. He pulled at the pencil with his other hand. The point flew out and jabbed into his palm. He couldn't get rid of the pencil, it kept dragging over his hand. He pulled at it and it made black, jagged lines on his skin. It tore the skin open.

He heaved the pencil across the room. It bounced on the wall. It seemed to jump as it fell on the eraser. It rolled over and was still.

He lost his balance. The chair fell back with a rush. His head banged sharply against the floorboards. His out-clutched hand grabbed at the window sill. Tiny splinters flashed into his skin like invisible needles. He howled in deathly fear. He kicked his legs. The midterm papers showered down over him like the beating wings of insane bird flocks.

The chair snapped up again on its springs. The heavy wheels rolled over his raw, bloody hands. He drew them back with a shriek. He reared a leg and kicked the chair over violently. It crashed on the side against the mantelpiece. The wheels spun and chattered like a swarm of furious insects.

He jumped up. He lost his balance and fell again, crashing against the window sill. The curtains fell on him like a python. The rods snapped. They flew down and struck him across the scalp. He felt warm blood trickle across his forehead. He thrashed about on the floor. The curtains seemed to writhe around him like serpents. He screamed again. He tore at them wildly. His eyes were terror-stricken.

He threw them off and lurched up suddenly, staggering around for balance. The pain in his hands assailed him. He looked at them. They were like raw butcher meat, skin hanging down in shreds. He had to bandage them. He turned toward the bathroom.

At his first step the rug slid from under him, the rug he had kicked aside. He

felt himself rush through the air. He reached down his hands instinctively to block the fall.

The white pain made his body leap. One finger snapped. Splinters shot into his raw fingers, he felt a burning pain in one ankle.

He tried to scramble up but the floor was like ice under him. He was deadly silent. His heart thudded in his chest. He tried to rise again. He fell, hissing with pain.

The bookshelf loomed over him. He cried out and flung up an arm. The case came crashing down on him. The top shelf drove into his skull. Black waves dashed over him, a sharp blade of pain drove into his head. Books showered over him. He rolled on his side with a groan. He tried to crawl out from underneath. He shoved the books aside weakly and they fell open. He felt the page edges slicing into his fingers like razor blades.

The pain cleared his head. He sat up and hurled the books aside. He kicked the bookcase back against the wall. The back fell off it and it crashed down.

He rose up, the room spinning before his eyes. He staggered into the wall, tried to hold on. The wall shifted under his hands it seemed. He couldn't hold on. He slipped to his knees, pushed up again.

"Bandage myself," he muttered hoarsely.

The words filled his brain. He staggered up through the quivering dining room, into the bathroom.

He stopped. No! Get out of the house! He knew it was not his will that brought him in there.

He tried to turn but he slipped on the tiles and cracked his elbow against the edge of the bathtub. A shooting pain barbed into his upper arm. The arm went numb. He sprawled on the floor, writhing in pain. The walls clouded; they welled around him like a blank shroud.

He sat up, breath tearing at his throat. He pushed himself up with a gasp. His arm shot out, he pulled open the cabinet door. It flew open against his cheek, tearing a jagged rip in the soft flesh.

His head snapped back. The crack in the ceiling looked like a wide idiot smile on a blank, white face. He lowered his head, whimpering in fright. He tried to back away.

His hand reached out. For iodine, for gauze!-his mind cried.

His hand came out with the razor.

It flopped in his hand like a new caught fish. His other hand reached in. For iodine, for gauze!-shrieked his mind.

His hand came out with dental floss. It flooded out of the tube like an endless white worm. It coiled around his throat and shoulders. It choked him.

The long shiny blade slipped from its sheath.

He could not stop his hand. It drew the razor heavily across his chest. It slit open the shirt. It sliced a valley through his chest. Blood spurted out.

He tried to hurl away the razor. It stuck to his hand. It slashed at him, at his arms and hands and legs and body.

At his throat.

A scream of utter horror flooded from his lips. He ran from the bathroom, staggering wildly into the living room.

"Sally!" he screamed, "Sally, Sally, Sally..."

The razor touched his throat. The room went black. Pain. Life ebbing away into the night. Silence over all the world.

The next day Dr. Morton came.

He called the police.

And later the coroner wrote in his report:

Died of self-inflicted wounds.

7 - DISAPPEARING ACT

These entries are from a school notebook which was found two weeks ago in a Brooklyn candy store. Next to it on the counter was a half finished cup of coffee. The owner of the store said no one had been there for three hours prior to the time he first noticed the book.

Saturday morning early

I shouldn't be writing this. What if Mary found it? Then what? The end, that's what, five years out the window.

But I have to put it down. I've been writing too long. There's no peace unless I put things on paper. I have to get them out and simplify my mind. But it's so hard to make things simple and so easy to make them complicated.

Thinking back through the months.

Where did it start? An argument of course. There must have been a thousand of them since we married. And always the same one, that's the horror.

Money.

"It's not a question of confidence in your writing," Mary will say. "It's a

question of bills and are we or aren't we going to pay them?"

"Bills for what?" I'll say. "For necessities? No. For things we don't even need."

"Don't need!" And off we go. God, how impossible life is without money. Nothing can overcome it, it's everything when it's anything. How can I write in peace with endless worries of money, money, money? The television set, the refrigerator, the washer-none of them paid for yet. And the bed she wants...

But despite all, I-I with wide-eyed idiocy keep making it even worse.

Why did I have to storm out of the apartment that first time? We'd argued, sure, but we'd argued before. Vanity, that's all. After seven years-*seven!*-of writing I've made only \$316 from it. And I'm still working nights at the lousy part-time typing job. And Mary has to keep working at the same place with me. Lord knows she has a perfect right to doubt. A perfect right to keep insisting I take that full-time job Jim keeps offering me on his magazine.

All up to me. An admission of lack, a right move and everything would be solved. No more night work. Mary could stay home the way she wants to, the way she should. The right move, that's all.

So, I've been making the wrong one. God, it makes me sick.

Me, going out with Mike. Both of us glassy-eyed imbeciles meeting Jean and Sally. For months now, pushing aside the obvious knowledge that we were being fools. Losing ourselves in a new experience. Playing the ass to perfection.

And, last night, both of us married men, going with them to their club apartment and...

Can't I say it? Am I afraid, too weak? Fool!

Adulterer.

How can things get so mixed up? I love Mary. Very much. And yet, even loving her, I did this thing.

And to make it all even more complicated, I enjoyed it. Jean is sweet and understanding, passionate, a sort of symbol of lost things. It was wonderful. I can't say it wasn't.

But how can wrong be wonderful? How can cruelty be exhilarating? It's all perverse, it's jumbled and confused and enraging.

Saturday afternoon

She's forgiven me, thank God. I'll never see Jean again. Everything will be all right.

This morning I went and sat on the bed and Mary woke up. She stared up at

me, then looked at the clock. She'd been crying.

"Where have you been?" she asked in that thin little girl's voice she gets when she's scared.

"With Mike," I told her. "We drank and talked all night."

She stared a second more. Then she took my hand slowly and pressed it against her cheek.

"I'm sorry," she said and tears came to her eyes.

I had to put my head next to hers so she wouldn't see my face. "Oh, Mary," I said. "I'm sorry too."

I'll never tell her. She means too much to me. I *can't* lose her.

Saturday night

We went down to Mandel's Furniture Mart this afternoon and got a new bed.

"We can't afford it, honey," Mary said. "Never mind," I said. "You know how lumpy the old one is. I want my baby to sleep in style."

She kissed my cheek happily. She bounced on the bed like an excited kid. "Oh, feel how soft!" she said.

Everything is all right. Everything except the new batch of bills in today's mail. Everything except for my latest story which won't get started. Everything except for my novel which has bounced five times. Burney House *has* to take it. They've held it long enough. I'm counting on it. Things are coming to a head with my writing. With everything. More and more I get the feeling that I'm a wound-up spring.

Well, Mary's all right.

Sunday night

More trouble. Another argument. I don't even know what it was about. She's sulking. I'm burning. I can't write when I'm upset. She knows that.

I feel like calling Jean. At least *she* was interested in my writing. I feel like saying the hell with everything. Getting drunk, jumping off a bridge, something. No wonder babies are happy. Life is simple for them. Some hunger, some cold, a little fear of darkness. That's all. Why bother growing up? Life gets too complicated.

Mary just called me for supper. I don't feel like eating. I don't even feel like staying in the house. Maybe I'll call up Jean later. Just to say hello.

Monday morning

Damn, damn, damn!

Not only to hold the book for over three months. That's not bad enough, oh no! They had to spill coffee all over the manuscript and send me a *printed* rejection slip to boot. I could kill them! I wonder if they think they know what they're doing?

Mary saw the slip. "Well, what *now*?" she said disgustedly.

"Now?" I said. I tried not to explode.

"Still think you can write?" she said.

I exploded. "Oh, they're the last judge and jury, aren't they?" I raged. "They're the final word on my writing aren't they?"

"You've been writing seven years," she said. "Nothing's happened."

"And I'll write seven more," I said. "A hundred, a *thousand*!"

"You won't take that job on Jim's magazine?"

"No, I will not."

"You said you would if the book failed."

"I *have* a job," I said, "and you have a job and that's the way it is and that's the way it's going to stay."

"It's not the way *I'm* going to stay!" she snapped.

She may leave me. Who cares! I'm sick of it all anyway. Bills, bills. Writing, writing. Failures, failures, *failures*! And little old life dribbling on, building up its beautiful, brain-bursting complexities like an idiot with blocks.

You! Who run the world, who spin the universe. If there's anybody listening to me, make the world simpler! I don't believe in anything but I'd give... *anything*. If only...

Oh, what's the use? I don't care anymore.

I'm calling Jean tonight.

Monday afternoon

I just went down to call up Jean about Saturday night. Mary is going to her sister's house that night. She hasn't mentioned me going with her so *I'm* certainly not going to mention it.

I called Jean last night but the switchboard operator at the Club Stanley said she was out. I figured I'd be able to reach her today at her office.

So I went to the corner candy store to look up the number. I probably should have memorized it by now. I've called her enough. But somehow, I never bothered. What the hell, there are always telephone books.

She works for a magazine called *Design Handbook* or *Designer's Handbook* or something like that. Odd, I can't remember that either. Guess I never gave it much thought.

I do remember where the office is though. I called for her there a few months ago and took her to lunch. I think I told Mary I was going to the library that day.

Now, as I recall, the telephone number of Jean's office was in the upper right hand corner of the right page in the directory. I've looked it up dozens of times and that's where it always was.

Today it wasn't.

I found the word *Design* and different business names starting with that word. But they were in the lower left hand corner of the left page, just the opposite. And I couldn't seem to find any name that clicked. Usually as soon as I see the name of the magazine I think: *there it is*. Then I look up the number. Today it wasn't like that.

I looked and looked and thumbed around but I couldn't find anything like *Design Handbook*. Finally I settled for the number of *Design Magazine* but I had the feeling it wasn't the one I was searching for.

I... I'll have to finish this later. Mary just called me for lunch, dinner, what have you? The big meal of the day anyway since we both work at night.

Later

It was a good meal. Mary can certainly cook. If only there weren't those arguments. I wonder if Jean can cook.

At any rate the meal steadied me a little. I needed it. I was a little nervous about that telephone call.

I dialled the number. A woman answered.

"*Design Magazine*," she said.

"I'd like to talk to Miss Lane," I told her.

"Who?"

"Miss Lane."

"One moment," she said. And I knew it was the wrong number. Every other time I'd called the woman who answered had said, "All right" immediately and connected me with Jean.

"What was that name again?" she asked.

"Miss Lane. If you don't know her, I must have the wrong number."

"You might mean Mr. Payne."

"No, no. Before, the secretary who answered always knew right away who I wanted. I have the wrong number. Excuse me."

I hung up. I was pretty irritated. I've looked that number up so many times it isn't funny.

Now, I can't find it.

Of course I didn't let it get me at first. I thought maybe the phone book in the candy store was an old one. So I went down the street to the drugstore. It had the same book.

Well, I'll just have to call her from work tonight. But I wanted to get her this afternoon so I'd be sure she'd save Saturday night for me.

I just thought of something. That secretary. Her voice. It was the same one who used to answer for *Design Handbook*.

But... Oh, I'm dreaming.

Monday night

I called the club while Mary was out of the office getting us some coffee.

I told the switchboard operator the same way I've told her dozens of times. "I'd like to speak to Miss Lane, please."

"Yes sir, one moment," she said.

There was silence a long time. I got impatient. Then the phone clicked again.

"What was that name?" the operator asked.

"Miss Lane, Miss *Lane*," I said. "I've called her any number of times."

"I'll look at the list again," she said.

I waited some more. Then I heard her voice again.

"I'm sorry. No one by that name is listed here."

"But I've called her any number of times there."

"Are you sure you have the right number?"

"Yes, yes, I'm sure. This is the Club Stanley, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"Well, that's where I'm calling."

"I don't know what to say," she said. "All I can tell you is that I'm certain there isn't anyone by that name living here."

"But I just called *last night*! You said she wasn't in."

"I'm sorry, I don't remember."

"Are you sure? Absolutely sure?"

"Well, if you want, I'll look at the list again. But no one by that name is on it, I'm positive."

"And no one by that name moved out within the last few days?"

"We haven't had a vacancy for a year. Rooms are hard to get in New York, you know."

"I know," I said, and hung up.

I went back to my desk. Mary was back from the drugstore.

She told me my coffee was getting cold. I said I was calling Jim in regard to that job. That was an ill-chosen lie. Now she'll start in on that again.

I drank my coffee and typed a while. But I didn't know what I was doing. I was trying hard to settle my mind.

She has to be somewhere, I thought. I know I didn't dream all those moments together. I know I didn't imagine all the trouble I had keeping it a secret from Mary. And I know that Mike and Sally didn't...

Sally! Sally lived at the Club Stanley too.

I told Mary I had a headache and was going out for an aspirin. She said there must be some in the men's room. I told her they were a kind I didn't like. I get involved in the flimsiest lies!

I half ran to the nearby drugstore. Naturally I didn't want to use the phone at work again.

The same operator answered my ring.

"Is Miss Sally Norton there?" I asked.

"One moment please," she said, and I felt a sinking sensation in my stomach. She always knew the regular members right away. And Sally and Jean had been living there for at least *two years*.

"I'm sorry," she said. "No one by that name is listed here."

I groaned. "Oh my God."

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No Jean Lane and no Sally Norton live there?"

"Are you the same party who called a little while ago?"

"Yes."

"Now look. If this is a joke..."

"A joke! Last night I called you and you told me Miss Lane was out and would I like to leave a message. I said no. Then I call tonight and you tell me there's nobody there by that name."

"I'm sorry. I don't know what to say. I was on the board last night but I don't recall what you say. If you like I'll connect you with the house manager."

"No, never mind," I said and hung up.

Then I dialled Mike's number. But he wasn't home. His wife Gladys answered, told me Mike had gone bowling.

I was a little nervous or I wouldn't have slipped up.

"With the boys?" I asked her.

She sounded kind of slighted. "Well, I *hope* so," she said.
I'm getting scared.

Tuesday night

I called Mike again tonight. I asked him about Sally.

"Who?"

"Sally."

"Sally who?" he asked.

"You know damn well Sally who, you hypocrite!"

"What is this, a gag?" he asked.

"Maybe it is," I said. "How about cutting it out?"

"Let's start all over," he said. "Who the hell is Sally?"

"You don't know Sally Norton?"

"No. Who is she?"

"You never went on a date with her and Jean Lane and me?"

"Jean Lane! What are you talking about?"

"You don't know Jean Lane either?"

"No, I *don't* and this is getting very unfunny. I don't know what you're trying to pull but cut it out. As two married men we..."

"Listen!" I almost shouted into the phone. "Where were you three weeks ago Saturday night?"

He was silent a moment.

"Wasn't that the night you and I bached while Mary and Glad went to see the fashion show at..."

"Bached! There was no one with us?"

"Who?"

"No girls? Sally? Jean?"

"Oh, here we go again," he groaned. "Look, pal, what's eating you? Anything I can do?"

I slumped against the wall of the telephone booth.

"No," I said weakly "No."

"Are you sure you're all right? You sound upset as hell."

I hung *up*. *I am* upset. I have a feeling as though I'm starving and there isn't a scrap of food in the whole world to feed me.

What's wrong?

Wednesday afternoon

There was only one way to find out if Sally and Jean had really disappeared.

I had met Jean through a friend I knew at college. Her home is in Chicago and so is my friend Dave's. He was the one who gave me her New York address, the Club Stanley. Naturally I didn't tell Dave I was married.

So I'd looked up Jean and I went out with her and Mike went out with her friend Sally. That's the way it was, I *know* it happened.

So today I wrote a letter to Dave. I told him what had happened. I begged him to check up at her home and write quickly and tell me it was a joke or some amazing set of coincidences. Then I got out my address book.

Dave's name is gone from the book.

Am I really going crazy? I know perfectly well that the address was in there. I can remember the night, years ago, when I carefully wrote it down because I didn't want to lose contact with him after we graduated from college. I can even remember the ink blot I made when I wrote it because my pen leaked.

The page is blank.

I remember his name, how he looked, how he talked, the things we did, the classes we took together.

I even had a letter of his he sent me one Easter vacation while I was at school. I remember Mike was over at my room. Since we lived in New York there wasn't time to get home because the vacation was only for a few days.

But Dave had gone home to Chicago and, from there, sent us a very funny letter, special delivery. I remember how he sealed it with wax and stamped it with his ring for a gag.

The letter is gone from the drawer where I always kept it.

And I had three pictures of Dave taken on graduation day. Two of them I kept in my picture album. They're still there...

But he's not on them.

They're just pictures of the campus with buildings in the background.

I'm afraid to go on looking. I could write the college or call them and ask if Dave ever went there.

But I'm afraid to try.

Thursday afternoon

Today I went out to Hempstead to see Jim. I went to his office. He was surprised when I walked in. He wanted to know why I'd travelled so far just to see him.

"Don't tell me you've decided to take that job offer," he said.

I asked him, "Jim, did you ever hear me talking about a girl named Jean in New York?"

"Jean? No, I don't think so."

"Come on, Jim. I did mention her to you. Don't you remember the last time you and I and Mike played poker? I told you about her then."

"I don't remember, Bob," he said. "What about her?"

"I can't find her. And I can't find the girl Mike went out with. And Mike denies that he ever knew either of them."

He looked confused so I told him again. Then he said, "What's this? Two old married men gallivanting around with..."

"They were just friends," I cut in. "I met them through a fellow I knew at college. Don't get any bright ideas."

"All right, all right, skip it. Where do I fit in?"

"I *can't find* them. They're gone. I can't even prove they existed."

He shrugged. "So what?" Then he asked me if Mary knew about it. I brushed that off.

"Didn't I mention Jean in any of my letters?" I asked him.

"Couldn't say. I never keep letters."

I left soon after that. He was getting too curious. I can see it now. He tells his wife, his wife tells Mary-fireworks.

When I rode to work late this afternoon I had the most awful feeling that I was something temporary. When I sat down it was like resting on air.

I guess I must be cracking. Because I bumped into an old man deliberately to find out if he saw me or felt me. He snarled and called me a clumsy idiot.

I was grateful for that.

Thursday night

Tonight at work I called up Mike again to see if he remembered Dave from college.

The phone rang, then it clicked off. The operator cut in and asked, "What number are you calling, sir?"

A chill covered me. I gave her the number. She told me there wasn't any such number.

The phone fell out of my hand and clattered on the floor. Mary stood up at her desk and looked over. The operator was saying, "Hello, hello, hello..." I hurriedly put the phone back in the cradle.

"What happened?" Mary asked when I came back to my desk.

"I dropped the phone." I said.

I sat and worked and shivered with cold.

I'm afraid to tell Mary about Mike and his wife Gladys.

I'm afraid she'll say she never heard of them.

Friday

Today I checked up on *Design Handbook*. Information told me there was no such publication listed. But I went over to the city anyway. Mary was angry about me going. But I had to go.

I went to the building. I looked at the directory in the lobby. And even though I knew I wouldn't find the magazine listed there, it was still a shock that made me feel sick and hollow.

I was dizzy as I rode up the elevator. I felt as if I were drifting away from everything.

I got off at the third floor at the exact spot where I'd called for Jean that afternoon.

There was a textile company there.

"There never was a magazine here?" I asked the receptionist.

"Not as long as I can remember," she said. "Of course I've only been here three years."

I went home. I told Mary I was sick and didn't want to go to work tonight. She said all right she wouldn't go either. I went into the bedroom to be alone. I stood in the place where we're going to put the new bed when it's delivered next week.

Mary came in. She stood in the doorway restively.

"Bob, what's the matter?" she asked. "Don't I have a right to know?"

"Nothing," I told her.

"Oh, please don't tell me that," she said. "I know there is."

I started toward her. Then I turned away.

"I... I have to write a letter," I said.

"Who to?"

I flared up. "That's my business," I said. Then I told her to Jim.

She turned away. "I wish I could believe you," she said.

"What does *that* mean?" I asked. She looked at me for a long moment and then turned away again.

"Give *Jim* my best," she said, and her voice shook. The way she said it made me shudder.

I sat down and wrote the letter to Jim. I decided he might help. Things were too desperate for secrecy. I told him that Mike was gone. I asked him if he remembered Mike.

Funny. My hand hardly shook at all. Maybe that's the way it is when you're almost gone.

Saturday

Mary had to work on some special typing today. She left early.

After I had breakfast I got the bank book out of the metal box in the bedroom closet. I was going down to the bank to get the money for the bed.

At the bank I filled out a withdrawal slip for \$97. Then I waited in line and finally handed the slip and the book to the teller.

He opened it and looked up with a frown.

"This supposed to be funny?" he asked.

"What do you mean, funny?"

He pushed the book across to me. "Next," he said.

I guess I shouted. "What's the matter with you!"

Out of the corner of my eye I saw one of the men at the front desks jump up and hurry over. A woman behind me said, "Let me at the window, if you please."

The man came fussing up.

"What seems to be the trouble, sir?" he asked me.

"The teller refuses to honour my bank book," I told him.

He asked for the book and I handed it to him. He opened it. Then he looked up in surprise. He spoke quietly.

"This book is blank," he said.

I grabbed it and stared at it, my heart pounding.

It was completely unused.

"Oh, my God," I moaned.

"Perhaps we can check on the number of the book," the man said. "Why don't you step over to my desk?"

But there wasn't any number on the book. I saw that. And I felt tears coming into my eyes.

"No," I said. "No." I walked past him and started toward the doorway

"One moment, sir," he called after me.

I ran out and ran all the way home.

I waited in the front room for Mary to come home. I'm waiting now. I'm looking at the bank book. At the line where we both signed our names. At the

spaces where we had made our deposits. Fifty dollars from her parents on our first anniversary Two hundred and thirty dollars from my veteran's insurance dividend. Twenty dollars. Ten dollars.

All blank.

Everything is going. Jean. Sally. Mike. Names fluttering away and the people with them.

Now this. What's next?

Later

I know.

Mary hasn't come home.

I called up the office. I heard Sam answer and I asked him if Mary was there. He said I must have the wrong number, no Mary works there. I told him who I was. I asked him if I worked there.

"Stop the kidding around," he said. "See you Monday night."

I called up my cousin, my sister, her cousin, her sister, her parents. No answer. Not even ringing. None of the numbers work. Then they're all gone.

Sunday

I don't know what to do. All day I've been sitting in the living room looking out at the street. I've been watching to see if anybody I know comes by the house. But they don't. They're all strangers.

I'm afraid to leave the house. That's all there is left. Our furniture and our clothes.

I mean *my* clothes. Her closet is empty. I looked into it this morning when I woke up and there wasn't a scrap of clothing left. It's like a magic act, everything disappearing, it's like...

I just laughed. I must be...

I called the furniture store. It's open Sunday afternoons. They said they had no record of us buying a bed. Would I like to come in and check?

I hung up and looked out the window some more.

I thought of calling up my aunt in Detroit. But I can't remember the number. And it isn't in my address book any more. The entire book is blank. Except for my name on the cover stamped in gold.

My name. Only my name. What can I say? What can I do? Everything is so simple. There's *nothing* to do.

I've been looking at my photograph album. Almost all the pictures are different. There aren't any people on them.

Mary is gone and all of our friends and our relatives.

It's funny

In the wedding picture I sit all by myself at a huge table covered with food. My left arm is out and bent as though I were embracing my bride. And all along the table are glasses floating in the air.

Toasting me.

Monday morning

I just got back the letter I sent Jim. It has NO SUCH ADDRESS stamped on the envelope.

I tried to catch the mailman but I couldn't. He was gone before I woke up.

I went down to the grocer before. He knew me. But when I asked him about Mary he said stop kidding, I'd die a bachelor and we both knew it.

I have only one more idea. It's a risk, but I'll have to take it. I'll have to leave the house and go downtown to the Veteran's Administration. I want to see if my records are there. If they are, they'll have something about my schooling and about my marriage and the people who were in my life.

I'm taking this book with me. I don't want to lose it. If I lost it, then I wouldn't have a thing in the world to remind me that I'm not insane.

Monday night

The house is gone.

I'm sitting in the corner candy store.

When I got back from the V.A. I found an empty lot there. I asked some of the boys playing there if they knew me. They said they didn't. I asked them what happened to the house. They said they'd been playing in that empty lot since they were babies.

The V.A. didn't have any records about me. Not a thing.

That means I'm not even a person now. All I have is all I am, my body and the clothes on it. All the identification papers are gone from my wallet.

My watch is gone too. Just like that. From my wrist.

It had an inscription on the back. I remember it.

To my own darling with all my love. Mary.

I'm having a cup of cof

8 - LEGION OF PLOTTERS

Then there was the man who sniffed interminably...

He sat next to Mr Jasper on the bus. Every morning he would come grunting up the front step and weave along the aisle to plop himself down beside Mr Jasper's slight form.

And - *sniff!* he would go as he perused his morning paper - *sniff, sniff!*

Mr Jasper would writhe. And wonder why the man persisted in sitting next to him. There were other seats available, yet the man invariably dropped his lumpish frame beside Mr Jasper and sniffed the miles away, winter and summer.

It wasn't as if it were cold out. Some Los Angeles mornings were coldish, granted. But they certainly did not warrant this endless sniffing as though pneumonia were creeping through the man's system.

And it gave Mr Jasper the willies.

He made several attempts to remove himself from the man's sphere of sniffing. First of all, he moved back two seats from his usual location. The man followed him. I *see*, surmised a near-fuming Mr Jasper, the man is in the habit of sitting by me and hasn't noticed that I've moved back two seats.

The following day Mr Jasper sat on the other side of the aisle. He sat with irascible eye watching the man weave his bulk up the aisle. Then his vitals petrified as the man's tweeded person plumped down by him. He glared an abominating glare out the window.

Sniff! - went the man - *Sa-niff!* - and Mr Jasper's dental plates ground together in porcelain fury.

The next day he sat near the back of the bus. The man sat next to him. The next day he sat near the front of the bus. The man sat next to him. Mr Jasper sat amidst his corroding patience for a mile and a third. Then, jaded beyond endurance, he turned to the man.

'Why are you following me?' he asked, his voice a trembling plaint.

The man was caught in mid-sniff. He gaped at Mr Jasper with cow like, uncomprehending eyes. Mr Jasper stood and stumbled the bus length away from the man. There he stood swaying from the overhead bar, his eyes as stone. The way that sniffing fool had looked at him, he brooded. It was insufferable. As if, by heaven, *he* had done something offensive!

Well, at least, he was momentarily free of those diurnally dripping nostrils. Crouched muscles unflexed gratefully. He signed with relief.

And the boy standing next to him whistled twenty-three choruses of *Dixie*.

Mr Jasper sold neckties.

It was an employment ridden with vexations, an employment guaranteed to scrape away the lining of any but the most impassive stomachs.

Mr Jasper's stomach walls were of the most susceptible variety.

They were stormed daily by aggravation, by annoyance and by women. Women who lingered and felt the wool and cotton and silk and walked away with no purchase. Women who beleaguered Mr Jasper's inflammable mind with interrogations and decrees and left no money but only a rigid Mr Jasper, one jot nearer to inevitable detonation.

With every taxing customer, a gushing host of brilliantly nasty remarks would rise up in Mr Jasper's mind, each one surpassing the one before. His mind would positively ache to see them free, to let them pour like torrents of acid across his tongue and, burning hot, spout directly into the women's faces.

But invariably close was the menacing phantom of floorwalker or store buyer. It flitted through his mind with ghostly dominion, shunting aside his yearning tongue, calcifying his bones with unspent wrath.

Then there were the women in the store cafeteria... They talked while they ate and they smoked and blew clouds of nicotine into his lungs at the very moment he was trying to ingest a bowl of tomato soup into his ulcerated stomach. *Poof!* went the ladies and waved their pretty hands to dispel the unwanted smoke.

Mr Jasper got it all.

Eyes beginning to emboss, he would wave it back. The women returned it. Thus did the smoke circulate until thinned out or reinforced by new, yet more intense, exhalations. *Poof!* And between waving and ladling and swallowing, Mr Jasper had spasms. The tannic acid of his tea hardly served to stem the course of burning in his stomach. He would pay his forty cents with oscillating fingers and return to work, a cracking man.

To face a full afternoon of complaints and queries and thumbing of merchandise and the topping of all by the girl who shared the counter with him and chewed gum as though she wanted the people in Arabia to hear her chewing. The smacking and the popping and the grinding made Mr Jasper's insides do frenzied contortions, made him stand statue like and disordered or else burst out with a hissing: '*Stop that disgusting sound!*'

Life was full of irritations.

Then there were the neighbours, the people who lived upstairs and on the sides. The society of *them*, that ubiquitous brotherhood which always lived in the

apartments around Mr Jasper.

They were a unity, those people. There was a touchstone of attitude in their behaviour, a distinct criterion of method.

It consisted of walking with extra weighty tread, of reassembling furniture with sustained regularity, of throwing wild and noisy parties every other night and inviting only those people who promised to wear hobnailed boots and dance the chicken reel. Of arguing about all subjects at top voice, of playing only cowboy and hillbilly music on a radio whose volume knob was irretrievably stuck at its farthest point. Of owning a set of lungs disguised as a two to twelve months old child, which puffed out each morning to emit sounds reminiscent of the lament of air raid sirens.

Mr Jasper's present nemesis was Albert Radenhausen, Junior, age seven months, possessor of one set of incredibly hardy lungs which did their best work between four and five in the morning.

Mr Jasper would find himself rolling on to his thin back in the dark, furnished, two-room apartment. He would find himself staring at the ceiling and waiting for the sound. It got to a point where his brain dragged him from needed sleep exactly ten seconds before four each morning. If Albert Radenhausen, Junior, chose to slumber on, it did no good to Mr Jasper. He just kept waiting for the cries.

He would try to sleep, but jangling concentration made him prey, if not to the expected wailing, then to the host of other sounds which beset his hypersensitive ears.

A car coughing past in the street. A rattle of Venetian blind. A set of lone footsteps somewhere in the house. The drip of a faucet, the barking of a dog, the rubbing legs of crickets, the creaking of wood. Mr Jasper could not control it all. Those sound makers he could not stuff, pad, twist off, adjust to - kept plaguing him. He would shut his eyes until they hurt, grip tight fists at his sides.

Sleep still eluded. He would jolt up, heaving aside the sheets and blankets, and sit there staring numbly into the blackness, waiting for Albert Radenhausen, Junior, to make his utterance so he could lie down again.

Analysing in the blackness, his mind would click out progressions of thought. Unduly sensitive? - he would comment within. I deny this vociferously. I am aware, Mr Jasper would self-claim. No more. I have ears. I can hear, can't I?

It was suspicious.

What morning in the litter of mornings that notion came, Mr Jasper could not recall. But once it had come it would not be dismissed. Though the definition of it was blunted by passing days, the core remained unremovable.

Sometimes in a moment of teeth-gritting duress, the idea would reoccur. Other

times it would be only a vague current of impression flowing beneath the surface.

But it stuck. All these things that happened to him. Were they subjective or objective, within or without? They seemed to pile up so often, each detail linking until the sum of provocations almost drove him mad. It almost seemed as though it were done with intent. As if...

As if it were a plan.

Mr Jasper experimented.

Initial equipment consisted of one white pad, lined, plus his ball-point pen. Primary approach consisted of jotting down various exasperations with the time of their occurrence, the location, the sex of the offender and the relative grossness of the annoyance; this last aspect gradated by numbers ranging from one to ten.

Example one, clumsily notated while still half asleep.

Baby crying, 4.52 a.m., next door to room, male, 7.

Following this entry, Mr Jasper settled back on his flattened pillow with a sigh approximating satisfaction. The start was made. In a few days he would know with assurance if his unusual speculation was justified.

Before he left the house at eight-seventeen a.m., Mr Jasper had accumulated three more entries; viz:

Loud thumping on floor, 6.33 a.m., upstairs from room, male (guess), 5.

Traffic noise, 7.00 a.m. outside of room, males, 6.

Radio on loud, 7.40 a.m. on, upstairs from room, female, 7.

One rather odd facet of Mr Jasper's efforts came to his attention as he left his small apartment. This was, in short, that he had put down much of his temper through this simple expedient of written analysis. Not that the various noises had failed, at first, to set his teeth on edge and cause his hands to flex involuntarily at his sides. They had not. Yet the translation of amorphous vexation into words, the reduction of an aggravation to one succinct memorandum somehow helped. It was strange but pleasing.

The bus trip to work provided further notations.

The sniffing man drew one immediate and automatic entry. But once that irritant was disposed of, Mr Jasper was alarmed to note the rapid accumulation

of four more. No matter where he moved on the bus there was fresh cause for drawing pen-point from scabbard and stabbing out more words.

Garlic breath, 8.27 a.m., bus, male, 7.

Heavy jostling, 8.28 a.m., bus, both sexes, 8.

Feet stepped on. No apology, 8.29 a.m., bus, woman, 9.

Driver telling me to go to back of bus, 8.33 a.m., bus, male, 9-

Then Mr Jasper found himself standing again beside the man with the uncommon cold. He did not take the pad from his pocket but his eyes closed and his teeth clamped together bitterly. Later he erased the original grading for the man.

10! he wrote in a fury.

And at lunch, amidst usual antagonisations, Mr Jasper, with a fierce and jaundiced eye, saw system to it all.

He seized on a blank pad page.

1. At least one irritation per five minutes. (Twelve per hour.) Not perfectly timed. Some occurring two in a minute.

Clever. Trying to throw me off the track by breaking continuity.

2. Each of the 12 hourly irritations is worse than the one before. The last of the 12 almost makes me explode.

THEORY: By placing the irritations so that each one tops the preceding one the final hourly addition is thus designed to provide maximum nerve impact: i.e. - Steering me into insanity!

He sat there, his soup getting cold, a wild scientific lustre to his eyes, investigatory heat churning up his system. Yes, by Heaven, yes, yes, yes!

But he must make sure.

He finished his lunch, ignoring smoke and chattering and unpalatable food. He slunk back to his counter. He spent a joyous afternoon scribbling down entries in his journal of convulsions.

The system held.

It stood firm before unbiased test. One irritation per five minutes. Some of

them, naturally, were so subtle that only a man with Mr Jasper's intuitive grasp, a man with a quest, could notice them. These aggravations were underplayed.

And cleverly so! - realised Mr Jasper. Underplayed and intended to dupe. Well, he would not be duped.

Tie rack knocked over, 1.18 p.m., store, female, 7.

Fly walking on hand, 1.43 p.m., store, female (?), 8.

Faucet in washroom splashing clothes, 2.19 p.m., store (sex), 9.

Refusal to buy tie because torn, 2.38 p.m., store, WOMAN, 10.

These were typical entries for the afternoon.

They were jotted down with a bellicose satisfaction by a shaking Mr Jasper. A Mr Jasper whose incredible theory was being vindicated.

About three o'clock he decided to eliminate those numbers from one to five since no provocations were mild enough to be judged so leniently.

By four he had discarded every grading but nine and ten.

By five he was seriously considering a new system which began at ten and ranged up to twenty-five.

Mr Jasper had planned to compile at least a week's annotations before preparing his case. But, somehow, the shocks of the day weakened him. His entries grew more heated, his penmanship less legible.

And, at eleven that night, as the people next door got their second wind and resumed their party with a great shout of laughter, Mr Jasper hurled his pad against the wall with a choking oath and stood there trembling violently. It was definite.

They were out to get him.

Suppose, he thought, there was a secret legion in the world. And that their prime devotion was to drive him from his senses.

Wouldn't it be possible for them to do this insidious thing without another soul knowing it? Couldn't they arrange their maddening little intrusions on his sanity so cleverly that it might always seem as if *he* were at fault; that he was only a hypersensitive little man who saw malicious intent in every accidental irritation? Wasn't that possible?

Yes. His mind pounded out the acceptance over and over.

It was conceivable, feasible, possible and, by heaven, he believed it!

Why not? Couldn't there be a great sinister legion of people who met in secret cellars by guttering candlelight? And sat there, beady eyes shining with nasty intent, as their leader spoke of more plans for driving Mr Jasper straight to hell?

Sure! Agent X assigned to the row behind Mr Jasper at a movie, there to talk during parts of the picture in which Mr Jasper was most absorbed, there to rattle paper bags at regular intervals, there to masticate popcorn deafeningly until Mr Jasper hunched up, blind-raging, into the aisle and stomped back to another seat.

And here, Agent Y would take over with candy and crinkly wrappers and extra moist sneezes.

Possible. More than possible. It could have been going on for years without his ever acquiring the slightest inkling of its existence. A subtle, diabolical intrigue, near impossible to detect. But now, at last, stripped of its concealing robes, shown in all its naked, awful reality.

Mr Jasper lay abed, cogitating.

No, he thought with a scant remainder of rationality, it is silly. It is a point outlandishly taken.

Why should these people do these things? That was all one had to ask. What was their motive?

Wasn't it absurd to think that all these people were out to get him? Dead, Mr Jasper was worth nothing. Certainly his two thousand dollar policy subdivided among a vast hidden legion would not amount to more than three or four cents a plotter. Even if he were to be coerced into naming them all as his beneficiaries.

Why, then, did Mr Jasper find himself drifting helplessly into the kitchenette? Why, then, did he stand there so long, balancing the long carving knife in his hand? And why did he shake when he thought of his idea?

Unless it was true.

Before he retired Mr Jasper put the carving blade into its cardboard sheath. Then, almost automatically, he found himself sliding the knife into the inside pocket of his suit coat.

And, horizontal in the blackness, eyes open, his flat chest rising and falling with unsteady beat, he sent out his bleak ultimatum to the legion that might be: 'If you are there, I will take no more.'

Then there was Albert Radenhausen, Junior, again at four in the morning. Jolting Mr Jasper into waking state, touching one more match to his inflammable system. There were the footsteps, the car horns, the dogs barking, the blinds rattling, the faucet dripping, the blankets bunching, the pillow flattening, the pyjamas twisting. And morning with its burning toast and bad coffee and broken cup and loud radio upstairs and broken shoelace.

And Mr Jasper's body grew rigid with unspeakable fury and he whined and hissed and his muscles petrified and his hands shook and he almost wept. Forgotten was his pad and list, lost in violent temper. Only one thing remained. And that... was self-defence.

For Mr Jasper knew then there *was* a legion of plotters and he knew also that the legion was redoubling its efforts because he *did* know and would fight back.

He fled the apartment and hurried down the street, his mind tormented. He must get control, he *must!* It was the crucial moment, the time of ferment. If he let the course of things go on unimpeded, the madness *would* come and the legion would have its victim.

Self-defence!

He stood, white-jawed and quivering, at the bus stop, trying with utmost vigour to resist. Never mind that exploding exhaust! Forget that strident giggle of passing female agent. Ignore the rising, mounting crescendo of split nerves. They would not win! His mind a rigid, waiting spring, Mr Jasper vowed victory.

On the bus, the man's nostrils drew mightily and people bumped into Mr Jasper and he gasped and knew that any moment he was going to scream and it would happen.

Sniff, sniff! went the man -SNIFF!

Mr Jasper moved away tensely. The man had never sniffed that loudly before. It was in the plan. Mr Jasper's hand fluttered up to touch the hard length of knife beneath his coat.

He shoved through packed commuters. Someone stepped on his foot. He hissed. His shoelace broke again. He bent over to fix it, and someone's knee hit the side of his head. He straightened up dizzily in the lurching bus, a strangled curse almost prying through his pressed, white lips.

One last hope remaining. *Could* he escape? The question punched away his senses. A new apartment? He'd moved before. On what he could afford there was no way of finding anything better. He'd always have the same type of neighbours.

A car instead of bus travel? He couldn't afford it.

Leave his miserable job? All sales jobs were just as bad and it was all he knew and he was getting older.

And even if he changed everything - *everything!* - the legion would still pursue him, tracking him down ruthlessly from tension to tension until the inevitable breakdown.

He was trapped.

And, suddenly, standing there with all the people looking at him, Mr Jasper saw the hours ahead, the days, the years -an agonizing, crushing heap of annoyances

and irritations and mind-searing aggravations. His head snapped around as he looked at everybody.

And his hair almost stood on end because he realised that all the people in the bus were members of the legion too. And he was helpless in their midst, a pawn to be buffeted about by their vicious, inhuman presence, his rights and individual sanctities endlessly subject to their malevolent conspiracy.

'No!' He screamed it out at them.

And his hand flew in beneath his coat like an avenging bird. And the blade flashed and the legion backed away screaming and, with a frenzied lunge, Mr Jasper fought his war for sanity.

MAN STABS SIX IN CROWDED BUS; IS SHOT BY POLICE
No Motive Found For Wild Attack

9 - LONG DISTANCE CALL

Just before the telephone rang, storm winds toppled the tree outside her window and jolted Miss Keene from her dreaming sleep. She flung herself up with a gasp, her frail hands crumpling twists of sheet in either palm. Beneath her flesh-less chest the heart jerked taut, the sluggish blood spurted. She sat in rigid muteness, her eyes staring at the night.

In another second, the telephone rang.

Who *on earth*? The question shaped unwittingly in her brain. Her thin hand faltered in the darkness, the fingers searching a moment and then Miss Elva Keene drew the cool receiver to her ear.

'Hello,' she said.

Outside a cannon of thunder shook the night, twitching Miss Keene's crippled legs. *I've missed the voice*, she thought, *the thunder has blotted out the voice*.

'Hello,' she said again.

There was no sound. Miss Keene waited in expectant lethargy. Then she repeated, 'Hel-lo,' in a cracking voice. Outside the thunder crashed again.

Still no voice spoke, not even the sound of a phone being disconnected met her ears. Her wavering hand reached out and thumped down the receiver with an angry motion.

'Inconsideration,' she muttered, thudding back on her pillow. Already her infirm

back ached from the effort of sitting.

She forced out a weary breath. Now she'd have to suffer through the whole tormenting process of going to sleep again - the composing of jaded muscles, the ignoring of abrasive pain in her legs, the endless, frustrating struggle to turn off the faucet in her brain and keep unwanted thoughts from dripping. Oh, well, it had to be done; Nurse Phillips insisted on proper rest. Elva Keene breathed slowly and deeply, drew the covers to her chin and laboured hopefully for sleep.

In vain.

Her eyes opened and, turning her face to the window, she watched the storm move off on lightning legs. *Why can't I sleep*, she fretted, *why must I always lie here awake like this?*

She knew the answer without effort. When a life was dull, the smallest element added seemed unnaturally intriguing. And life for Miss Keene was the sorry pattern of lying flat' or being propped on pillows, reading books which Nurse Phillips brought from the town library, getting nourishment, rest, medication, listening to her tiny radio - and waiting, *waiting* for something different to happen.

Like the telephone call that wasn't a call.

There hadn't even been the sound of a receiver replaced in its cradle. Miss Keene didn't understand that. Why would anyone call her exchange and then listen silently while she said 'Hello,' over and over again? *Had* it actually been anyone calling?

What she should have done, she realised then, was to keep listening until the other person tired of the joke and put down the receiver. What she should have done was to speak out forcefully about the inconsideration of a prankish call to a crippled maiden lady, in the middle of a stormy night. Then, if there *had* been someone listening, whoever it was would have been properly chastened by her angry words and...

'Well, of course.'

She said it aloud in the darkness, punctuating the sentence with a cluck of somewhat relieved disgust. Of course, the telephone was out of order. Someone had tried to contact her, perhaps Nurse Phillips to see if she was all right. But the other end of the line had broken down in some way, allowing her phone to ring but no verbal communication to be made. Well, of course, that was the case.

Miss Keene nodded once and closed her eyes gently. *Now to sleep*, she thought. Far away, beyond the county, the storm cleared its murky throat. *I hope no one is worrying*, Elva Keene thought, *that would be too bad*.

She was thinking that when the telephone rang again.

There, she thought, *they are trying to reach me again*. She reached out hurriedly

in the darkness, fumbled until she felt the receiver, then pulled it to her ear.

'Hello,' said Miss Keene.

Silence.

Her throat contracted. She knew what was wrong, of course, but she didn't like it, no, not at all.

'Hello?' she said tentatively, not yet certain that she was wasting breath.

There was no reply. She waited a moment, then spoke a third time, a little impatient now, loudly, her shrill voice ringing in the dark bedroom. *'Hello!'*

Nothing. Miss Keene had the sudden urge to fling the receiver away. She forced down that curious instinct - no, she must wait; wait and listen to hear if anyone hung up the phone on the other end of the line.

So she waited.

The bedroom was very quiet now, but Elva Keene kept straining to hear; either the sound of a receiver going down or the buzz which usually follows. Her chest rose and fell in delicate lurches, she closed her eyes in concentration, then opened them again and blinked at the darkness. There was no sound from the telephone; not a click, not a buzz, not a sound of someone putting down a receiver.

'Hello!' she cried suddenly, then pushed away the receiver.

She missed her target. The receiver dropped and thumped once on the rug. Miss Keene nervously clicked on the lamp, wincing as the leprous bulb light filled her eyes. Quickly, she lay on her side and tried to reach the silent, voiceless telephone.

But she couldn't stretch far enough and crippled legs prevented her from rising. Her throat tightened. My God, must she leave it there all night, silent and mystifying.

Remembering then, she reached out abruptly and pressed the cradle arm. On the floor, the receiver clicked, then began to buzz normally. Elva Keene swallowed and drew in a shaking breath as she slumped back on her pillow.

She threw out hooks of reason then and pulled herself back from panic. *This is ridiculous, she thought, getting upset over such a trivial and easily explained incident. It was the storm, the night, the way in which I'd been shocked from sleep. (What was it that had awakened me?) AH these things piled on the mountain of teeth-grinding monotony that's my life. Yes, it was bad, very bad.* But it wasn't the incident that was bad. It was her reaction to it.

Miss Elva Keen numbed herself to further premonitions. *'I shall sleep now'* she ordered her body with a petulant shake. She lay very still and relaxed. From the floor she could hear the telephone buzzing like the drone of far-off bees. She ignored it.

Early the next morning, after Nurse Phillips had taken away the breakfast dishes, Elva Keen called the telephone company.

This is Miss Elva,' she told the operator.

'Oh, yes, Miss Elva,' said the operator, a Miss Finch. 'Can I help you?'

'Last night my telephone rang twice,' said Elva Keene. 'But when I answered it, no one spoke. And I didn't hear any receiver drop. I didn't even hear a dial tone - just silence.'

'Well, I'll tell you, Miss Elva,' said the cheery voice of Miss Finch, 'that storm last night just about ruined half our service. We're being flooded with calls about knocked down lines and bad connections. I'd say you're pretty lucky your phone is working at all.'

'Then you think it was probably a bad connection,' prompted Miss Keene, 'caused by the storm?'

'Oh, yes, Miss Elva, that's all.'

'Do you think it will happen again?'

'Oh, it *may*,' said Miss Finch. 'It *may*. I really couldn't tell you, Miss Elva. But if it does happen again, you just call me and then I'll have one of our men check on it.'

'All right,' said Miss Elva. 'Thank you, dear.'

She lay on her pillows all morning in a relaxed torpor. *It gives one a satisfied feeling, she thought, to solve a mystery, slight as it is. It had been a terrible storm that caused the bad connection. And no wonder when it had even knocked down the ancient oak-tree beside the house. That was the noise that had awakened me of course, and a pity it was that the dear tree had fallen. How it shaded the house in hot summer months. Oh, well, I suppose I should be grateful, she thought, that the tree fell across the road and not across the house.*

The day passed uneventfully, an amalgam of eating, reading Angela Thirkell and the mail (two throw-away advertisements and the light bill), plus brief chats with Nurse Phillips. Indeed, routine had set in so properly that when the telephone rang early that evening, she picked it up without even thinking.

'Hello,' she said.

Silence.

It brought her back for a second. Then she called Nurse Phillips.

'What is it?' asked the portly woman as she trudged across the bedroom rug.

'This is what I was telling you about,' said Elva Keene, holding out the receiver. 'Listen!'

Nurse Phillips took the receiver in her hand and pushed back grey locks with the earpiece. Her placid face remained placid. 'There's nobody there,' she

observed.

'That's right,' said Miss Keene. 'That's right. Now you just listen and see if you can hear a receiver being put down. I'm sure you won't.'

Nurse Phillips listened for a moment, then shook her head. 'I don't hear anything,' she said and hung up.

'Oh, wait!' Miss Keene said hurriedly. 'Oh, well, it doesn't matter,' she added, seeing it was already down. 'If it happens too often, I'll just call Miss Finch and they'll have a repairman check on it.'

'I see,' Nurse Phillips said and went back to the living room and Faith Baldwin.

Nurse Phillips left the house at eight, leaving on the bedside table, as usual, an apple, a cookie, a glass of water and the bottle of pills. She puffed up the pillows behind Miss Keene's fragile back, moved the radio and telephone a little closer to the bed, looked around complacently, then turned for the door, saying, 'I'll see you tomorrow.'

It was fifteen minutes later when the telephone rang. Miss Keene picked up the receiver quickly. She didn't bother saying hello this time - she just listened.

At first it was the same - an absolute silence. She listened a moment more, impatiently. Then, on the verge of replacing the receiver, she heard the sound. Her cheek twitched, she jerked the telephone back to her ear.

'Hello?' she asked tensely.

A murmuring, a dull humming, a rustling sound - what was it? Miss Keene shut her eyes tightly, listening hard, but she couldn't identify the sound; it was too soft, too undefined, it deviated from a sort of whining vibration... to an escape of air... to a bubbling sibilance. *It must be the sound of the connection, she thought, it must be the telephone itself making the noise. Perhaps a wire blowing in the wind somewhere, perhaps...*

She stopped thinking then. She stopped breathing. The sound had ceased. Once more, silence rang in her ears. She could feel the heartbeats stumbling in her chest again, the walls of her throat closing in. *Oh, this is ridiculous, she told herself. I've already been through this - it was the storm, the storm!*

She lay back on her pillows, the receiver pressed to her ear, nervous breaths faltering from her nostrils. She could feel unreasoning dread rise like a tide within her, despite all attempts at sane deduction. Her mind kept slipping off the glassy perch of reason; she kept falling deeper and deeper.

Now she shuddered violently as the sounds began again. They couldn't *possibly* be human sounds, she knew, and yet there was something about them, some inflection, some almost identifiable arrangement of...

Her lips shook and a whine began to hover in her throat. But she couldn't put down the telephone, she simply couldn't. The sounds held her hypnotised.

Whether they were the rise and fall of the wind or the muttering of faulty mechanisms, she didn't know, but they would not let her go.

'Hello ?' she murmured, shakily.

The sounds rose in volume. They rattled and shook in her brain.

'Hello!' she screamed.

'H-e-l~l-o,' answered a voice on the telephone. Then Miss Keene fainted dead away.

'Are you certain it was someone saying *hello?*' Miss Finch asked Miss Elva over the telephone. 'It might have been the connection, you know.'

'I tell you it was a *man!*' a shaking Elva Keene screeched. 'It was the same man who kept listening to me say hello over and over and over again without answering me back. The same one who made terrible noises over the telephone!'

Miss Finch cleared her throat politely. 'Well, I'll have a man check your line, Miss Elva, as soon as he can. Of course, the men are very busy now with all the repairs on storm wreckage, but as soon as it's possible...'

'And what am I going to do if this - this *person* calls again?'

'You just hang up on him, Miss Elva.'

'But he keeps calling!'

'Well.' Miss Finch's affability wavered. 'Why don't you find out who he is, Miss Elva? If you can do that, why, we can take immediate action, you see and After she'd hung up, Miss Keene lay against the pillows tensely, listening to Nurse Phillips sing husky love songs over the breakfast dishes. Miss Finch didn't believe her story, that was apparent. Miss Finch thought she was a nervous old woman falling prey to imagination. Well, Miss Finch would find out differently.

'I'll just keep calling her and calling her until she *does*,' she said irritably to Nurse Phillips just before afternoon nap.

'You just do that,' said Nurse Phillips. 'Now take your pill and lie down,'

Miss Keene lay in grumpy silence, her vein-rutted hands knotted at her sides. It was ten after two and, except for the bubbling of Nurse Phillips's front room snores, the house was silent in the October afternoon. *It makes me angry*, thought Elva Keene, *that no one will take this seriously. Well - her thin lips pressed together - the next time the telephone rings I'll make sure that Nurse Phillips listens until she does hear something.*

Exactly then the phone rang.

Miss Keene felt a cold tremor lace down her body. Even in the daylight with sunbeams speckling her flowered coverlet, the strident ringing frightened her. She dug porcelain teeth into her lower lip to steady it. *Shall I answer it?* the question came and then, before she could even think to answer, her hand picked

up the receiver. A deep ragged breath; she drew the phone slowly to her ear. She said, 'Hello? '

The voice answered back, 'Hello?' - hollow and inanimate.

'Who is this?' Miss Keene asked, trying to keep her throat clear.

'Hello?'

'Who's calling, please?'

'Hello?'

'Is anyone there!'

'Hello?'

'Please ... !'

'Hello?'

Miss Keene jammed down the receiver and lay on her bed trembling violently, unable to catch her breath. *What is it*, begged her mind, *what in God's name is it?*

'Margaret!' she cried. 'Margaret!'

In the front room she heard Nurse Phillips grunt abruptly and then start coughing.

'Margaret, please...!'

Elva Keene heard the large bodied woman rise to her feet and trudge across the living room floor. *I must compose my-self*, she told herself, fluttering hands to her fevered cheeks. *I must tell her exactly what happened, exactly.*

'What is it?' grumbled the nurse. 'Does your stomach ache?'

Miss Keene's throat drew in tautly as she swallowed. 'He just called again,' she whispered.

'Who?'

'That man!'

'What Man?'

'The one who keeps calling!' Miss Keene cried. 'He keeps saying hello over and over again. That's all he says - hello, hello, hel -'

'Now stop this,' Nurse Phillips scolded stolidly. 'Tie back and...'

'I don't *want* to lie back!' she said frenziedly. 'I want to know who this terrible person is who keeps frightening me!'

'Now don't work yourself into a state,' warned Nurse Phillips. 'You know how upset your stomach gets.'

Miss Keene began to sob bitterly. 'I'm afraid. I'm afraid of him. Why does he keep calling me?'

Nurse Phillips stood by the bed looking down in bovine inertia. 'Now, what did Miss Finch tell you?' she said softly.

Miss Keene's shaking lips could not frame the answer.

'Did she tell you it was the connection?' the nurse soothed. 'Did she?'

'But it isn't! It's a man, a *man*!'

Nurse Phillips expelled a patient breath. 'If it's a man,' she said, 'then just hang up. You don't have to talk to him. Just hang up. Is that so hard to do?'

Miss Keene shut tear-bright eyes and forced her lips into a twitching line. In her mind the man's subdued and listless voice kept echoing. Over and over, the inflection never altering, the question never deferring to her replies - just repeating itself endlessly in doleful apathy. *Hello? Hello?* Making her shudder to the heart.

'Look,' Nurse Phillips spoke.

She opened her eyes and saw the blurred image of the nurse putting the receiver down on the table.

'There,' Nurse Phillips said, 'nobody can call you now. You leave it that way. If you need anything all you have to do is dial. Now isn't that all right? Isn't it?'

Miss Keene looked bleakly at the nurse. Then, after a moment, she nodded once. Grudgingly.

She lay in the dark bedroom, the sound of the dial tone humming in her ear; keeping her awake. *Or am I just telling myself that?* she thought. *Is it really keeping me awake? Didn't I sleep that first night with the receiver off the hook? No, it wasn't the sound, it was something else.*

She closed her eyes obdurately. *I won't listen*, she told herself, *I just won't listen to it*. She drew in trembling breaths of the night. But the darkness would not fill her brain and blot away the sound.

Miss Keene felt around on the bed until she found her bed jacket. She draped it over the receiver, swathing its black smoothness in woolly turns. Then she sank back again, stern breathed and taut. *I will sleep*, she demanded, *I will sleep*.

She heard it still.

Her body grew rigid and abruptly, she unfolded the receiver from its thick wrappings and slammed it down angrily on the cradle. Silence filled the room with delicious peace. Miss Keene fell back on the pillow with a feeble groan. *Now to sleep*, she thought.

And the telephone rang.

Her breath snuffed off. The ringing seemed to permeate the darkness, surrounding her in a cloud of ear-lancing vibration. She reached out to put the receiver on the table again, then jerked her hand back with a gasp, realising she would hear the man's voice again.

Her throat pulsed nervously. *What I'll do*, she planned, *what I'll do is take off the receiver very quickly - very quickly - and put it down, then push down on the arm and cut off the line. Yes, that's what I'll do!*

She tensed herself and spread her hand out cautiously until the ringing phone was under it. Then, breath held, she followed her plan, slashed off the ring, reached quickly for the cradle arm...

And stopped, frozen, as the man's voice reached out through the darkness to her ears. 'Where are you?' he asked. 'I want to talk to you.'

Claws of ice clamped down on Miss Keene's shuddering chest. She lay petrified, unable to cut off the sound of the man's dull, expressionless voice, asking, 'Where are you? I want to talk to you.'

A sound from Miss Keene's throat, thin and fluttering.

And the man said, 'Where are you? I want to talk to you.'

'No, no,' sobbed Miss Keene.

'Where are you? I want to...'

She pressed the cradle arm with taut white fingers. She held it down for fifteen minutes before letting it go.

'I tell you I won't have it!'

Miss Keene's voice was a frayed ribbon of sound. She sat inflexibly on the bed, straining her frightened anger through the mouthpiece vents.

'You say you hang up on this man and he still calls?' Miss Finch inquired.

'I've *explained* all that!' Elva Keene burst out. 'I had to leave the receiver off the phone all night so he wouldn't call. And the buzzing kept me awake. I didn't get a *wink* of sleep! Now, I want this line checked, do you hear me? I want you to stop this terrible thing!'

Her eyes were like hard, dark beads. The phone almost slipped from her palsied fingers.

'All right, Miss Elva,' said the operator. 'I'll send a man out today.'

Thank you, dear, thank you,' Miss Keene said. 'Will you call me when

Her voice stopped abruptly as a clicking sound started on the telephone.

'The line is busy,' she announced.

The clicking stopped and she went on. To repeat, will you let me know when you find out who this terrible person is V

'Surely, Miss Elva, surely. And I'll have a man check your telephone this afternoon. You're at 127 Mill Lane, aren't you?'

That's right, dear. You will see to it, won't you?'

'I promise faithfully, Miss Elva. First thing today.'

Thank you, dear,' Miss Keene said, drawing in relieved breath.

There were no calls from the man all that morning, none that afternoon. Her tightness slowly began to loosen. She played a game of cribbage with Nurse Phillips and even managed a little laughter. It was comforting to know that the

telephone company was working on it now. They'd soon catch that awful man and bring back her peace of mind.

But when two o'clock came, then three o'clock - and still no repairman at her house - Miss Keene began worrying again.

'What's the *matter* with that girl?' she said pettishly. 'She promised me faithfully that a man would come this afternoon.'

'He'll be here,' Nurse Phillips said. 'Be patient.'

Four o'clock arrived and no man. Miss Keene would not play cribbage, read her book or listen to her radio. What had begun to loosen was tightening again, increasing minute by minute until at five o'clock, when the telephone rang, her hand spurted out rigidly from the flaring sleeve of her bed jacket and clamped down like a claw on the receiver. *If the man speaks*, raced her mind, *if he speaks I'll scream until my heart stops*.

She pulled the receiver to her ear. 'Hello?'

'Miss Elva, this is Miss Finch.'

Her eyes closed and breath fluttered through her lips. 'Yes,' she said.

'About those calls you say you've been receiving.'

'Yes?' In her mind, Miss Finch's words cutting - 'those calls you *say* you've been receiving.'

'We sent a man out to trace them,' continued Miss Finch. 'I have his report here.'

Miss Keene caught her breath. 'Yes?'

'He couldn't find anything.'

Elva Keene didn't speak. Her grey head lay motionless on the pillow, the receiver pressed to her ear.

'He says he traced the - the difficulty to a fallen wire on the edge of town.'

'Fallen wire?'

Yes, Miss Elva.' Miss Finch did not sound happy,

'You're telling me I didn't hear anything?'

Miss Finch's voice was firm. 'There's no way anyone could have phoned you from that location,' she said.

'I tell you a *man* called me!'

Miss Finch was silent and Miss Keene's fingers tightened convulsively on the receiver.

'There must be a phone there,' she insisted. 'There must be *some* way that man was able to call me.'

'Miss Elva, the wire is lying on the ground.' She paused. 'Tomorrow, our crew will put it back up and you won't be...'

'There *has* to be a way he could call me!'

'Miss Elva, there's no one out there!'

'Out where, *where?*'

The operator said, 'Miss Elva, it's the cemetery.'

In the black silence of her bedroom, a crippled maiden lady lay waiting. Her nurse would not remain for the night; her nurse had patted her and scolded her and ignored her.

She was waiting for a telephone call.

She could have disconnected the phone, but she had not the will. She lay there waiting, waiting, thinking.

Of the silence - of ears that had not heard, seeking to hear again. Of sounds bubbling and muttering - the first stumbling attempts at speech by one who had not spoken - how long? Of - *hello ? hello ?* - first greeting by one long silent. Of - *where are you ?* Of (that which made her lie so rigidly) the clicking and the operator speaking her address. Of -

The telephone ringing.

A pause. Ringing. The rustle of a nightgown in the dark.

The ringing stopped.

Listening.

And the telephone slipping from white fingers, the eyes staring, the thin heartbeats slowly pulsing.

Outside, the cricket-rattling night.

Inside, the words still sounding in her brain - giving terrible meaning to the heavy, choking silence.

'Hello, Miss Elva. I'll be right over.'

10 - SLAUGHTER HOUSE

I submit for your consideration, the following manuscript which was mailed to this office some weeks ago. It is presented with neither evidence nor judgment as to its validity. This determination is for the reader to make.

Samuel D. Machildon, Associate Secretary, Rand Society for Psychical Research

This occurred many years ago. My brother Saul and I had taken a fancy to the old, tenantless Slaughter House. Since we were boys the yellow-edged pronouncement-FOR SALE-had hung lopsided in the grimy front window. We had vowed with boyish ambition that, when we were old enough, the sign must come down.

When we had attained our manhood, this aspiration somehow remained. We had a taste for the Victorian, Saul and I. His painting was akin to that roseate and buxom transcription of nature so endeared by the nineteenth century artists. And my writing, though far from satisfactory realization, bore the definite stamp of prolixity, was marked by that meticulous sweep of ornate phrase which the modernists decry as dullness and artifice.

Thus, for the headquarters of our artistic labours, what better retreat than the Slaughter House, that structure which matched in cornice and frieze our intimate partialities? None, we decided, and acted readily on that decision.

The yearly endowment arranged by our deceased parents, albeit meager, we knew to suffice, since the house was in gross need of repair and, moreover, without electricity.

There was also, if hardly credited by us, a rumour of ghosts. Neighbourhood children quite excelled each other in relating the harrowing experiences they had undergone with various of the more eminent spectres. We smiled at their clever fancies, never once losing the conviction that purchase of the house would be wholly practical and satisfactory.

The real estate office bumbled with financial delight the day we took off their hands what they had long considered a lost cause, having even gone so far as to remove the house from their listings. Convenient arrangements were readily fashioned and, in a matter of hours, we had moved all belongings from our uncommodious flat to our new, relatively large house.

Several days were then spent in the most necessary task of cleaning. This presented itself as far more difficult a project than first anticipated. Dust lay heavy throughout the halls and rooms. Our energetic dusting would send clouds of it billowing expansively, filling the air with powdery ghosts of dirt. We noted in respect to that observation that many a spectral vision might thus be made explicable if the proper time were utilized in experiment.

In addition to dust on all places of lodgement, there was thick grime on glass surfaces ranging from downstairs windows to silver scratched mirrors in the upstairs bath. There were loose banisters to repair, door locks to recondition, yards of thick rugging out of whose mat to beat decades of dust, and a multitude of other chores large and small to be performed before the house could be

deemed liveable.

Yet, even with grime and age admitted, that we had come by an obvious bargain was beyond dispute. The house was completely furnished, moreover furnished in the delightful mode of the early 1900s. Saul and I were thoroughly enchanted. Dusted, aired, scrubbed from top to bottom, the house proved indeed a fascinating purchase. The dark luxurious drapes, the patterned rugs, the graceful furniture, the yellow keyed spinet; everything was complete to the last detail, that detail being the portrait of a rather lovely young woman which hung above the living room mantel.

When first we came upon it, Saul and I stood speechless before its artistic quality. Saul then spoke of the painter's technique and finally, in rapt adulation, discussed with me the various possibilities as to the identity of the model.

It was our final conjecture that she was the daughter or wife of the former tenant, whoever he had been, beyond having the name of Slaughter.

Several weeks passed by. Initial delight was slaked by full-time occupancy and intense creative effort.

We rose at nine, had our breakfast in the dining room, then proceeded to our work, I in my sleeping chamber, Saul in the solarium, which we had been able to improvise into a small studio. Each in our places, the morning passed quietly and effectively. We lunched at one, a small but nourishing meal and then resumed work for the afternoon.

We discontinued our labours about four to have tea and quiet conversation in our elegant front room. By this hour it was too late to go on with our work, since darkness would be commencing its surrounding pall on the city. We had chosen not to install electricity both for reasons of monetary prudence and the less sordid one of pure aesthetics.

We would not, for the world, have distorted the gentle charm of the house by the addition of blatant, sterile electric light. Indeed we preferred the flickering silence of candlelight in which to play our nightly game of chess. We needed no usurping of our silence by noxious radio Heating's, we ate our bakery bread unsinged and found our wine quite adequately cooled from the old icebox. Saul enjoyed the sense of living in the past and so did I. We asked no more.

But then began the little things, the intangible things, the things without reason.

Walking on the stairs, in the hallway, through the rooms, Saul or I, singly or together, would stop and receive the strangest impulse in our minds; of fleeting moment yet quite definite while existent.

It is difficult to express the feeling with adequate clarity. It was as if we heard something although there was no sound, as though we saw something when there was nothing before the eye. A sense of shifting presence, delicate and

tenuous, hidden from all physical senses and yet, somehow, perceived.

There was no explaining it. In point of fact we never spoke of it together. It was too nebulous a feeling to discuss, incapable of being materialized into words. Restless though it made us, there was no mutual comparison of sensation nor could there be. Even the most abstract of thought formation could not approach what we were experiencing.

Sometimes I would come upon Saul casting a hurried glance over his shoulder, or surreptitiously reaching out to stroke empty air as though he expected his fingers to touch some invisible entity. Sometimes he would catch me doing the same. On occasion we would smile awkwardly, both of us appreciating the moment without words.

But our smiles soon faded. I almost think we were afraid to deride this unknown aegis for fear that it might prove itself actual. Not that my brother or I were superstitious in the least degree. The very fact that we purchased the house without paying the slightest feaisance to the old wives' tales about its supposed anathema seems to belie the suggestion that we were, in any manner, inclined toward mystic apprehensions. Yet the house did seem, beyond question, to possess some strange potency.

Often, late at night, I would lie awake, knowing somehow that Saul was also awake in his room and that we both were listening and waiting, consciously certain about our expectation of some unknown arrival which was soon to be effected.

And effected it was.

II

It was perhaps a month and a half after we had moved into Slaughter House that the first hint was shown as to the house's occupants other than ourselves.

I was in the narrow kitchen cooking supper on the small gas stove. Saul was in the dining alcove arranging the table for supper. He had spread a white cloth over the dark, glossy mahogany and, on it, placed two plates with attendant silver. A candelabrum of six candles glowed in the center of the table casting shadows over the snowy cloth.

Saul was about to place the cups and saucers beside the plates as I turned back to the stove. I twisted the knob a trifle to lower the flame under the chops. Then, as I began to open the icebox to get the wine, I heard Saul gasp loudly and, something thumped on the dining-room rug. I whirled and hurried out of the kitchen as fast as I could.

One of the cups had fallen to the floor, its handle snapping off. I hurriedly

picked it up, my eyes on Saul.

He was standing with his back to the living room archway, his right hand pressed to his cheek, a look of speechless shock contorting his handsome features.

"What is it?" I asked, placing the cup on the table.

He looked at me without answering and I noticed how his slender fingers trembled on his whitening cheek.

"Saul, what is it?"

"A hand," he said. "A hand. *It touched my cheek.*"

I believe my mouth fell open in surprise. I had, deep within the inner passages of my mind, been expecting something like this to happen. So had Saul. Yet now that it had, a natural sense of oppressive impact was on both of our shoulders.

We stood there in silence. How can I express my feeling at that moment? It was as though something tangible, a tide of choking air, crept over us like some shapeless, lethargic serpent. I noticed how Saul's chest moved in convulsive leaps and depressions and my own mouth hung open as I gasped for breath.

Then, in an added moment, the breathless vacuum was gone, the mindless dread dissolved. I managed to speak, trusting to break this awesome spell with words.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

His slender throat contracted. He forced a smile to his lips, a smile more frightened than pleasant.

"I hope not," he replied.

He reinforced his smile with some effort.

"Can it really be?" he went on, his joviality failing noticeably.

"Can it really be that we've been duped into buying ourselves a haunted house?"

I maintained an effort to join in with his spirit of artificial gusto for the sake of our own minds. But it could not long last nor did I feel any abiding comfort in Saul's feigned composure. We were both exceptionally hypersensitive, had been ever since our births, mine some twenty-seven years before, his twenty-five. We both felt this bodiless premonition deep in our senses.

We spoke no more of it, whether from distaste or foreboding I cannot say. Following our unenjoyable meal, we spent the remainder of the evening at pitifully conducted card games. I suggested, in one unguarded moment of fear, that it might be worth our consideration to have electrical outlets installed in the house.

Saul scoffed at my apparent submission and seemed a little more content to

retain the relative dimness of candlelight than the occurrence before dinner would have seemed to make possible in him. Notwithstanding that, I made no issue of it.

We retired to our rooms quite early as we usually do. Before we separated, however, Saul said something quite odd to my way of thinking. He was standing at the head of the stairs looking down, I was about to open the door to my room.

"Doesn't it all seem familiar?" he asked.

I turned to face him, hardly knowing what he was talking about.

"Familiar?" I asked of him.

"I mean," he tried to clarify, "as though we'd been here before. No, more than just been here. Actually *lived* here."

I looked at him with a disturbing sense of alarm gnawing at my mind. He lowered his eyes with a nervous smile as though he'd said something he was just realizing he should not have said. He stepped off quickly for his room, muttering a most uncordial good night to me.

I then retired to my own room, wondering about the unusual restlessness which had seemed to possess Saul throughout the evening manifesting itself not only in his words but in his impatient card play, his fidgety pose on the chair upon which he sat, the agitated flexing of his fingers, the roving of his beautiful dark eyes about the living room. As though he were looking for something.

In my room, I disrobed, effected my toilet and was soon in bed. I had lain there about an hour when I felt the house shake momentarily and the air seemed abruptly permeated with a weird, discordant humming that made my brain throb.

I pressed my hands over my ears and then seemed to wake up, my ears still covered. The house was still. I was not at all sure that it had not been a dream. It might have been a heavy truck passing the house, thus setting the dream into motion in my upset mind. I had no way of being absolutely certain.

I sat up and listened. For long minutes I sat stock still on my bed and tried to hear if there were any sounds in the house. A burglar perhaps or Saul prowling about in quest of a midnight snack. But there was nothing. Once, while I glanced at the window, I thought I saw, out of the corner of my eye, a momentary glare of bluish light shining underneath my door.

But, when I quickly turned my head, my eyes saw only the deepest of blackness and, at length, I sank back on my pillow and fell into a fitful sleep.

III

The next day was Sunday. Frequent wakings during the night and light, troubled sleep had exhausted me. I remained in bed until ten-thirty although it

was my general habit to rise promptly at nine each day, a habit I had acquired when quite young.

I dressed hastily and walked across the hall, but Saul was already up. I felt a slight vexation that he had not come in to speak to me as he sometimes did nor even looked in to tell me it was past rising time.

I found him in the living room eating breakfast from a small table he had placed in front of the mantelpiece. He was sitting in a chair that faced the portrait.

His head moved around quickly as I came in. He appeared nervous to me.

"Good morning," he said.

"Why didn't you wake me up?" I said. "You know I never sleep this late."

"I thought you were tired," he said. "What difference does it make?"

I sat down across from him, feeling rather peevish as I took a warm biscuit from beneath the napkin and broke it open.

"Did you notice the house shaking last night?" I asked.

"No. Did it?"

I made no reply to the flippant air of his counter-question. I took a bite from my biscuit and put it down.

"Coffee?" he said. I nodded curtly and he poured me a cup, apparently oblivious to my pique.

I looked around the table.

"Where is the sugar?" I asked.

"I never use it," he answered. "You know that."

"I use it," I said.

"Well, you weren't up, John," he replied with an antiseptic smile.

I rose abruptly and went into the kitchen. I opened up one side of the cabinet and retrieved the sugar bowl with irritable fingers.

Then, as I passed it, about to leave the room, I tried to open the other side of the cabinet. It would not open. The door had been stuck quite fast since we moved in. Saul and I had decided in facetious keeping with neighbourhood tradition that the cabinet contained shelf upon shelf of dehydrated ghosts.

At the moment, however, I was in little humour for droll fancies. I pulled at the door knob with rising anger. That I should suddenly insist on that moment to open the cabinet only reflected the ill-temper Saul's neglect could so easily create in me. I put down the sugar bowl and placed both hands on the knob.

"What on earth are you doing?" I heard Saul ask from the front room.

I made no answer to his question but pulled harder on the cabinet knob. But it was as if the door were imbedded solidly into the frame and I could not loosen it the least fraction of an inch.

"What were you doing?" Saul asked as I sat down.

"Nothing," I said and the matter ended. I sat eating with little if any appetite. I do not know whether I felt more anger than hurt. Perhaps it was more a sense of injury since Saul is usually keenly sensitive to my responses, but that day he seemed not the slightest particle receptive. And it was that blase dispassion in him, so different from his usual disposition, that had so thoroughly upset me.

Once, during the meal, I glanced up at him to discover that his eyes were directed over my shoulder, focusing on something behind me. It caused a distinct chill to excite itself across my back.

"What are you looking at?" I asked of him.

His eyes refocused themselves on me and the slight smile he held was erased from his lips.

"Nothing," he replied.

Nonetheless I twisted about in my chair to look. But there was only the portrait over the mantel and nothing more.

"The portrait?" I asked.

He made no answer but stirred his coffee with deceptive composure.

I said, "Saul, I'm talking to you."

His dark eyes on me were mockingly cold. As though they meant to say, Well, so you are but that is hardly a concern of mine, is it?

When he would not speak I chose to attempt an alleviation of this inexplicable tension which had risen between us. I put down my cup.

"Did you sleep well?" I asked.

His gaze moved up to me quickly, almost, I could not avoid the realization, almost suspiciously.

"Why do you ask?" he spoke distrustingly.

"Is it such an odd question?"

Again he made no reply. Instead he patted his thin lips with his napkin and pushed back his chair as though to leave.

"Excuse me," he muttered, more from habit than politeness, I sensed.

"Why are you being so mysterious?" I asked with genuine concern.

He was on his feet, ready to move away, his face virtually blank.

"I'm not," he said. "You're imagining things."

I simply could not understand this sudden alteration in him nor relate it to any equivalent cause. I stared incredulously at him as he turned away and began walking toward the hallway with short, impatient steps.

He turned left to pass through the archway and I heard his quick feet jumping up the carpeted steps. I sat there unable to move, looking at the spot from which

he had just disappeared.

It was only after a long while that I turned once more to examine the portrait more carefully.

There seemed nothing unusual about it. My eyes, moved over the well-formed shoulders to the slender, white throat, the chin, the cupid-bowed red lips, the delicately upturned nose, the frank green eyes. I had to shake my head. It was only the portrait of a woman and no more. How could this affect any man of sense? How could it affect Saul?

I could not finish my coffee but let it stand cold on the table. I rose, pushed back my chair and started upstairs. I went directly to my brother's room and turned the knob to enter, then felt a stiffening in my body as I realized he had locked himself in. I turned away from his door, tight-lipped and thoroughly annoyed, disturbed beyond control.

As I sat in my room most of the day, sporadically reading, I listened for his footsteps in the hall. I tried to reason out the situation in my mind, to resolve this alien transformation in his attitude towards me.

But there seemed no resolution save that of assuming headache, imperfect sleep or other equally dissatisfying explanations. They served not at all to decipher his uneasiness, the foreign way in which his eye regarded me, his marked disinclination to speak civilly.

It was then, against my will I must state clearly, that I began to suspect other than ordinary causes and to yield a momentary credence to local accounts of the house in which we lived. We had not spoken of that hand he had felt, but was it because we believed it was imagination or because we knew it wasn't?

Once during the afternoon, I stood in the hallway with closed eyes, listening intently as though I meant to capture some particular sound and ferret it out. In the deep quiet I stood wavering back and forth on the floor, the very stillness ringing in my ears.

I heard nothing. And the day passed with slow, lonely hours. Saul and I had a morose supper together during which he rejected all extended conversation and multiple offers of card games and chess during the later evening.

After he had finished his meal, he returned immediately to his room and I, after washing the dishes, returned to mine and soon retired.

The dream returned again, yet not in certainty a dream, I thought lying there in the early morning. And had it not been a dream only a hundred trucks could have made such a vibration as that which shook the house in my fancy. And the light which shone beneath the door was too bright for candlelight, a glaring blue lucency of illumination. And the footsteps I heard were very audible. Were they only in my dream however? I could not be sure.

IV

It was nearly nine-thirty before I rose and dressed, strongly irritated that my work schedule was being thus altered by concern. I completed my toilet quickly and went out into the hall, anxious to lose myself in occupation.

Then, as I looked automatically toward Saul's room I noticed that the door was slightly ajar. I immediately assumed he was already up and at work above in the solarium, so I did not stop to see. Instead, I hurried downstairs to make myself a hasty breakfast, noticing as I entered the kitchen that the room was just as I had left it the night before.

After a moderate breakfast I went upstairs again and entered Saul's room.

It was with some consternation that I found him still on his bed. I say "on" rather than "in" since the blankets and sheets had been, and violently so, it appeared, thrown aside and were hanging down in twisted swirls upon the wooden floor.

Saul lay on the bottom sheet, clad only in a pyjama trousers, his chest, shoulders and face dewed with tiny drops of perspiration.

I bent over and shook him once, but he only mumbled in sleep-ridden lethargy. I shook him again with hardened fingers and he rolled over angrily.

"Leave me alone," he spoke in thickened irritability. "You know I've been..."

He stopped, as though, once more, he was about to speak of something he should not.

"You've been what?" I inquired, feeling a rising heat of aggravation in my system.

He said nothing but lay there on his stomach, his face buried in the white pillow.

I reached down and shook him again by the shoulder, this time more violently. At this he pushed up abruptly and almost screamed at me.

"Get out of here!"

"Are you going to paint?" I asked shaking nervously.

He rolled on his side and squirmed a little, preparatory to sleeping again. I turned away with a harsh breath of anger.

"You make your own breakfast," I said, feeling yet more fury at the senseless import of my words. As I pulled shut the door in leaving I thought I heard Saul laughing.

I went back to my room and started to work on my play though hardly with success. My brain could not grasp concentration. All I could think of was the uncommon way in which my pleasant life had been usurped.

Saul and I had always been exceptionally close to one another. Our lives had

always been inseparable, our plans were always mutual plans, our affections invariably directed primarily upon each other. This had been so since our boyhood when in grade school other children laughingly called us The Twins in contraction of our fuller title-The Siamese Twins. And, even though I had been two years ahead of Saul in school we were always together, choosing our friends with a regard to each other's tastes and distastes, living, in short, with and for each other.

Now this; this enraging schism in our relationship. This harsh severance of comradely association, this abrupt, painful transmutation from intimacy to callous inattention.

The change was of such a gravity to me that almost immediately I began to look for the most grave of causes. And, although the implied solution seemed at the very least tenuous, I could not help but entertain it willingly. And, once more entertained, I could not remove myself from the notion.

In the quiet of my room, I pondered of ghosts.

Was it then possible that the house was haunted? Hastily I mulled over the various implications, the various intimations that the theory was verifiable.

Excluding the possibility that they were dream content, there were the heaving vibrations and the weird, high-pitched humming which had assailed my brain. There was the eerie blue light I had dreamed or actually seen beneath my door. And, finally, the most damning of evidence, there was Saul's statement that he had felt a hand on his cheek. *A cold, damp hand!*

Yet, despite all, it is a difficult thing to admit the existence of ghosts in a coldly factual world. One's very instincts rebel at the admission of such maddening possibility. For, once the initial step is made into the supernatural, there is no turning back, no knowing where the strange road leads except that it is quite unknown and quite terrible.

So actual were the premonitions I began to feel that I put aside my unused writing tablet and pen and rushed into the hall and to Saul's room as though something were awry there.

The ludicrous, unexpected sound of his snoring set me momentarily at ease. But my smile was short-lived, vanishing instantly when I saw the half-empty liquor bottle on his bedside table.

The shock of it made my flesh grow cold. And the thought came-he is corrupted, although I had no knowledge of its source.

As I stood there above his spread-eagled form, he groaned once and turned on his back. He had dressed, but his slept-in attire was now dishevelled and crumpled. His face, I noted, was unshaven and extremely haggard and the bloodshot gaze he directed at me was that of one stranger to another.

"What do you want?" he asked in hoarse, unnatural tones.

"Are you out of your mind?" I said. "What in God's name...?"

"Get out of here," he said again to me, his brother.

I stared at his face and, although I knew it could be only the result of drink distorting his unshaven features, I could not dispel the apprehension that he was, somehow, coarse, and a shudder of strange revulsion ran through me.

I was about to take the bottle away from him when he swung at me, a wildly inaccurate flinging of the arm, his sense of direction blunted by a drink-thickened brain.

"I said, get *out* of here!" he shouted in a fury, streaks of mottled red leaping into his cheeks.

I backed away, almost in fright, then turned on my heel and hurried into the hall, trembling with the shock of my brother's unnatural behaviour. I stood outside his door for a long time, listening to him toss restlessly on his bed, groaning. And I felt close to tears.

Then, without thought, I descended the darkening stairway, moved across the living room and dining alcove and entered the small kitchen. There, in the black silence, I held aloft a spluttering match and then lit the heavy candle I retrieved from the stove.

My footsteps, as I moved about the kitchen, seemed oddly muffled, as though I were hearing them through thick, cotton padding in my ears. And I began to get the most incongruous sensation that the very silence was drumming roughly in my ears.

As I passed the left hand side of the cabinet I found myself swaying heavily as though the dead, motionless air had suddenly become mobile and were buffeting me about. The silence was a roaring now and, suddenly, I clutched out for support and my twitching fingers knocked a dish onto the tile floor.

A positive shudder ran through me then because the sound of the breaking dish had been hollow and unreal, the sound of something greatly distant. If I had not seen the porcelain fragments lying on the dark tile I might have sworn the dish had not shattered at all.

With a sense of mounting restlessness I pushed my index fingers into my ears and twisted them around as if to ease what seemed an obstruction. Then I clenched my fist and struck the fastened cabinet door, almost desperate for the comfort of logical sound. But no matter how strong my blows, the sound came to my ears no louder than that of someone far away knocking at some door.

I turned hastily to the small icebox, very anxious now to make my sandwiches and coffee and be out of there, up in my room once more.

I put the bread on a tray, poured a cupful of the steaming black coffee and put the coffee pot down on its burner again. Then, with distinct trepidation, I bent over and blew out the candle.

The dining alcove and living room were oppressively dark now. My heart began to thud heavily as I moved across the rug, my footsteps muffled as I walked. I held the tray in stiff, unfeeling fingers, my gaze directed straight ahead. As I moved, my breath grew more harsh, bursting from my nostrils as I held my lips pressed tightly together lest they begin shaking with fright.

The blackness and the dead, utter silence seemed to crush in on me like solid walls. I held my throat stiff, my every muscle suspended by will for fear that relaxation would cause me to shake without control.

Halfway to the hall I heard it.

A soft, bubbling laughter which seemed to permeate the room like a cloud of sound.

A swamping wave of coldness covered my body and my footsteps halted abruptly as my legs and body stiffened.

The laughter did not cease. It continued, moving about me as if someone-or some *thing*-circled me on soundless tread, its eyes always on me. I began to tremble and, in the stillness, I could hear the rattling of the cup on my tray.

Then, suddenly, a damp, cold hand pressed against my cheek!

With a terrified howl of fear, I dropped the tray and ran wildly into the hall and up the stairs, my weakening legs propelling me forward in the blackness. As I ran there was another gush of liquid laughter behind me, like a thin trail of icy air in the stillness.

I locked the door to my room and hurled myself on the bed, pulling the bedspread over myself with shaking fingers. My eyes tightly shut, I lay there with heart pounding against the mattress; And, in my mind, the hideous cognition that all my fears were justified was a knife stabbing at delicate tissues.

It was all true.

As actually as if a living human hand had touched me, I had felt that cold and soggy hand on my cheek. But what living person was down there in the darkness?

For a short time I belied to tell myself it had been Saul executing a cruel and vicious joke. But I knew it had not been, for I would have heard his footsteps and I had heard none, either before or now.

The clock was chiming ten when I was at last able to summon the courage to throw off the spread, scrabble for the box of matches on my bedside table and light the candle.

At first the guttering light assuaged fear slightly. But then I saw how little it illuminated the silent darkness and I avoided, with a shudder, the sight of huge and shapeless walls. I cursed the old house for its lack of electricity. Fear might be eased in blazing lamplight. As it was, the imperfect flickering of that tiny flame did nothing to allay my fears.

I wanted to go across the hall and see if Saul were all right. But I was afraid to open my door, imagining hideous apparitions lurking there in the blackness, hearing once more in my mind the ugly, viscid laughter. I hoped that Saul was so hopelessly under alcoholic influence that nothing short of an earthquake could awaken him.

And, though I yearned to be near him even if he were treating me faithlessly, I felt no courage whatsoever. And, quickly undressing, I hastened to my bed and buried my head beneath the blankets again.

V

I woke suddenly, shivering and afraid. The bedclothes were gone from my body, the black silence as awful as it had been earlier in the night.

I reached for the blankets anxiously, my fingers groping for them. They had fallen from the edge of the bed. I rolled on my side hurriedly and reached down, my fingers recoiling as they came in contact with the icy floorboards.

Then, as I reached for the blankets, I saw the light beneath the door.

It remained in sight only the fragment of a second but I knew I had seen it. And, as it passed abruptly from my eyes, the throbbing began. My room seemed filled with the humming pulsations. I could feel the bed shaking beneath me and my skin growing taut and frigid; my teeth chattering together.

Then the light appeared again and I heard the sound of bare feet and knew it was Saul walking in the night.

Driven more by fear for his safety than by courage, I threw my legs over the side of the bed and padded to the door, shuddering at the iciness of the flooring beneath my soles.

Slowly I opened the door, my body held tight in anticipation of what I might see.

But the hall was pitch black and I walked out and over to the door of Saul's room, listening to see if I could hear the sound of his breathing. But before I could judge anything, the hall below was suddenly illumined with that unearthly blue glow and I turned and rushed, again instinctively, to the head of the stairs and stood there clutching the old banister, staring down.

Below, an aura of intense brilliant blue light was passing through the hall moving in the direction of the living room.

My heart leaped! Saul was following it, arms ahead of him in the familiar pose of the somnambulist, his eyes staring ahead and glittering in the shapeless blue effulgence.

I tried to call his name but found that my voice could make no utterance. I tried to move for the stairs to wrest my Saul away from this terror. But a wall, invisible in the blackness, held me back. It grew close and airless. I struggled violently but it was to no avail. My muscles were strengthless against the horrible, impossible power that clutched me.

Then, suddenly, my nostrils and brain were assaulted by a pungent, sickly odour that made my senses reel. My throat and stomach burned with almost tangible fire. The darkness grew more intense. It seemed to cling to me like hot, black mud, constricting my chest so that I could hardly breathe. It was like being buried alive in a black oven, my body bound and rebound with heavy grave wrappings. I trembled, sobbing and ineffectual.

Then, abruptly, it all passed and I stood there in the cold hallway soaked with perspiration, weak from my frantic efforts. I tried to move but could not, tried to remember Saul, but was incapable of preventing the thought of him from slipping from my numbed brain. I shivered and turned to go back to my room but, at the first step, my legs buckled and I pitched forward heavily on the floor. The icy surface of it pressed against my flesh and, my body wracked by shivering, I lost consciousness.

When my eyes opened again I still lay crumpled on the cold floor.

I rose to a sitting position, the hall before my eyes wavering in alternate tides of light and darkness. My chest felt tight and a remorseless chill gripped my body. I pulled myself up to a bent-over stance and staggered to Saul's room, a cough burning in my throat as I stumbled across the floor and against his bed.

He was there and looked emaciated. He was unshaved and the dark wiry beard on his skin seemed like some repugnant growth. His mouth was open and emitting sounds of exhausted slumber and his smooth, white chest rose and fell with shallow' movements.

He made no motion as I tugged weakly at his shoulder. I spoke his name and was shocked at the hoarse, grating sound of my own voice. I spoke it again, and he stirred with a grumble and opened one eye to look at me.

"I'm sick," I muttered, "Saul, I'm sick."

He rolled on one side, turning on his back to me. A sob of anguish tore at my throat.

"Saul!"

He seemed to snap his body around insanely then, his hands clenched into bony, white fists at his sides.

"Get out of here!" he screamed. "Leave me alone or I'll kill you!"

The body-shaking impact of his words drove me back from the bed to where I stood dumbly staring at him, breath stabbing at my throat. I saw him toss his body back over as if he wanted to break it. And I heard him mutter to himself miserably, *"Why does the day have to last so long?"*

A spasm of coughing struck me then and, my chest aching with fiery pains, I struggled back to my own room and got into bed with the movements of an old man. I fell back on the pillow and pulled up the blankets, then lay there shivering and helpless.

There I slept all day in spasmodic periods offset by waking moments of extreme pain. I was unable to rise to get myself food or water. All I could do was lie there, shaking and weeping. I felt beaten as much by Saul's cruelty to me as by the physical suffering. And the pain in my body was extremely severe. So much so that during one seizure of coughing it was so awful I began to cry like a child, hitting the mattress with weak, ineffective fists and kicking my legs deliriously.

Yet, even then, I think I wept for more than the pain. I wept for my only brother who loved me not.

It seemed that night came more swiftly than I had ever seen it come before. I lay alone in the darkness praying through mute lips that no harm should come to him.

I slept a while and then, abruptly, I was awake, staring at the light beneath the door, hearing the high-pitched humming in my ears. And I realized in that moment that Saul still loved me but that the house had corrupted his love.

And from this knowledge came resolution, from despair I gained amazing heart. I struggled to my feet and swayed there dizzily until the streaks before my eyes dispersed. Then I put on my robe and slippers, went to the door and threw it open.

What made things happen as they did I cannot say. Perhaps it was my feeling of courage that caused the black obstruction in the hall to melt before me. The house was trembling with the vibrations and the humming. Yet they seemed to lessen as I moved down the stairway and, all of a sudden, the blue light vanished from the living room and I heard loud and furious rumblings there.

When I entered, the room was in its usual order. A candle was burning on the mantel. But my eyes were riveted to the center of the floor.

Saul stood there, half naked and motionless, his body poised as though he were

dancing, his eyes fastened to the portrait.

I spoke his name sharply. His eyes blinked and, slowly, his head turned to me. He didn't seem to comprehend my presence there for, suddenly, his glance flew about the room and he cried out in despairing tones: "Come back! Come back!"

I called his name again and he stopped looking around but directed his gaze at me. His face was gaunt and cruelly lined in the flickering candlelight. It was the face of a lunatic. He gnashed his teeth together and started to move toward me.

"I'll kill you," he muttered in liquid tones. "I'll *kill* you."

I backed away.

"Saul, you're out of your mind. You don't..."

I could say no more for he rushed at me, his hands extended as if he would clutch at my throat. I tried to step aside but he grabbed hold of my robe and pulled me against him.

We began to struggle, I begging him to throw off this terrible spell he was under, he panting and gnashing his teeth. My head was being shaken from side to side and I saw our monstrous shadows heaving on the walls.

Saul's grip was not his own. I have always been stronger than he but, at that moment, his hands seemed like cold iron. I began to choke and his face blurred before my eyes. I lost balance and we both fell heavily to the floor. I felt the prickly rug against my cheek, his cold hands tightening on my throat.

Then my hand came in contact with something cold and hard. It was the tray I had dropped the night before, I realized. I gripped it and, realizing that he was out of his mind and meant to kill me, I picked it up and drove it across his head with all the power I had remaining.

It was a heavy metal tray and Saul sank to the floor as if struck dead, his hands slipping from my bruised throat. I struggled up, gasping for breath, and looked at him.

Blood was running from a deep gash in his forehead where the edge of the tray had struck.

"Saul!" I screamed, horrified at what I'd done.

Frantically I leaped up and rushed to the front door. As I flung it open I saw a man walking by in the street. I ran to the porch railing and called to him.

"Help!" I cried. "Call an ambulance!"

The man lurched and looked over at me with startled fright.

"For God's sake!" I beseeched him. "My brother has struck his head! Please call an ambulance!"

For a long moment he stared at me, open-mouthed, then broke into a nervous flight up the street. I called after him but he would not stop to listen. I was certain he would not do as I'd asked.

As I turned back, I saw my bloodless face in the hall mirror. and realized with a start that I must have frightened the wits out of the man. I felt weak and afraid again, the momentary strength sapped from me. My throat was dry and raw, my stomach on edge. I was barely able to walk back to the living room on trembling stalks of legs.

I tried to lift Saul to a couch but dead weight was too much for me and I sank to my knees beside him. My body slumped forward and, half crouched, half lay by the side of my brother. The harsh sound of my breathing was the only sound I could hear. My left hand stroked Saul's hair absently and quiet tears flowed from my eyes.

I cannot say how long I had been there when the throbbing began again; as if to show me that it hadn't really gone away.

I still crouched there like a dead thing, my brain almost in coma. I could feel my heart beating like some old clock in my chest, the dull-edged and muffled pendulum hitting against my ribs with a lifeless rhythm. All sound registered with similar force, the clock on the mantel, my heart and the endless throbbing; all blending into one horrible beat that became a part of me, that became *me*. I could sense myself sinking deeper and deeper as a drowning man slips helplessly beneath the silent waters.

Then I thought I heard a tapping of feet through the room, the rustling of skirts and, far off, a hollow laughter of women.

I raised my head abruptly, my skin tight and cold.

A figure in white stood in the doorway.

It began to move toward me and I rose with a strangled cry on my lips only to collapse into darkness.

VI

What I had seen had been not a ghost but an intern from the hospital. The man I had called in the street had, apparently, done what I'd asked. It will give some indication of the state I was in when I reveal that I heard neither the ringing of the front doorbell nor the pounding of the intern's fist on the half-open door. Indeed, had the door not been open, I am certain that I would be dead now.

They took Saul to the hospital to have his head cared for. There being nothing wrong with me but nervous exhaustion, I remained in the house. I had wanted to go with Saul, but was told that the hospital was overcrowded and I would do more good by staying home in bed.

I slept late the next morning, rising about eleven. I went downstairs and had a substantial breakfast, then returned to my room and slept a few hours more.

About two, I had some lunch. I planned to leave the house well before darkness to make sure nothing further happened to me. I could find a room in a hotel. It was clear that we would have to desert the place regardless of whether we sold it or not. I anticipated some trouble with Saul on that point but made up my mind to stand firm on my decision.

About five o'clock I dressed and left my room, carrying a small bag for the night. The day was almost gone and I hurried down the stairs, not wishing to remain in the house any longer. At the bottom of the staircase I stepped across the entry hall and closed my hand over the doorknob.

The door would not open.

At first I would not allow myself to believe this. I stood there tugging, trying to combat the cold numbness that was spreading itself over my body. Then I dropped my bag and pulled at the knob with both hands but to no avail. It was as securely fastened as the cabinet door in the kitchen.

Suddenly, I turned from the door and ran into the living room but all the windows were jammed fast into their frames. I looked around the room, whimpering like a child, feeling unspoken hate for myself for letting myself be trapped again. I cursed loudly and, as I did, a cold wind lifted the hat from my head and hurled it across the floor.

Abruptly, I placed my shaking hands over my eyes and stood there trembling violently, afraid of what might happen any second, my heart hammering against my chest. The room seemed to chill markedly and I heard that grotesque humming noise again that came as if from another world. It sounded like laughter to me, laughter that mocked me for my poor, feeble efforts to escape.

Then, with equal suddenness, I remembered Saul again, remembered that he needed me and I pulled away my hands from my eyes and screamed aloud: "Nothing in this house can harm me!"

Sudden cessation of the sound gave me added courage. If my will could successfully defy the ungodly powers of the place, then perhaps it could also destroy them. If I went upstairs, if I slept in Saul's bed, then I too would know what he had experienced and thus be enabled to help him.

I felt no lack of confidence in my will to resist, never once stopping to think that my ideas might not be my own.

Quickly, two steps at a time, I rushed up the stairs and into my brother's room. There I quickly removed my hat, overcoat and suit coat, loosened my tie and collar and sat down on the bed. Then, after a moment, I lay down and looked up at the darkening ceiling. I tried to keep my eyes open but, still fatigued, I soon fell asleep.

It seemed only a moment before I was fully awake, my body tingling with sensations of not unpleasant character. I could not understand the strangeness of it. The darkness seemed alive. It shimmered under my gaze as I lay there, warm with a heat that betokened sensualism although there was hardly any apparent cause for such a feeling.

I whispered Saul's name without thinking. Then the thought of him was taken from my brain as if invisible fingers had plucked it away.

I remember rolling over and laughing to myself, behaviour most extraordinary if not unseemly for a person of my steady inclinations. The pillow felt like silk against my face and my senses began to fade. The darkness crept over me like warm syrup, soothing my body and mind. I muttered senselessly to myself, feeling as if my muscles were sucked dry of all energy, heavy as rock and lethargic with a delicious exhaustion.

Then, when I had almost slipped away, I felt another presence in the room. To my incredulous realization, it was not only familiar to me but I had absolutely no fear of it. Only an inexplicable sense of languorous expectation.

Then she came to me, the girl in the portrait.

I stared at the blue haze about her for only a moment for this quickly faded and, in my arms, was a vibrantly warm body. I remember no one feature of her behaviour for everything was lost in overall sensation, a sensation mixed of excitement and revulsion, a sense of hideous yet overpowering rapacity. I hung suspended in a cloud of ambivalence, my soul and body corroded with unnatural desire. And in my mind and echoing on my tongue I spoke a name over and over again.

The name *Clarissa*.

How can I judge the number of sick, erotic moments I spent there with her? Sense of time completely vanished from the scheme of things. A thick giddiness enveloped me. I tried to fight it but it was no use. I was consumed as my brother Saul had been consumed by this foul presence from the grave of night.

Then, in some inconceivable fashion, we were no longer on the bed but downstairs, whirling about in the living room dancing wildly and closely. There was no music, only that incessant, beating rhythm I had heard those nights before. Yet now it seemed like music to me as I spun about the floor holding in my arms the ghost of a dead woman, entranced by her stunning beauty yet, at the same time, repelled by my uncontrollable hunger for her.

Once I closed my eyes for a second and felt a terrible coldness crawling in my stomach. But when I opened them it was gone and I was happy once more. *Happy?* It seems hardly the word now. Say rather hypnotized, torpid, my brain a numbed vessel of flesh unable to remove me one iota from this clutching spell.

Dancing went on and on. The floor was filled with couples. I am sure of that and yet I recall no aspect of their dress or form. All I remember is their faces, white and glistening, their eyes dull and lifeless, their mouths hanging open like dark, bloodless wounds.

Around and around and then a man with a large tray standing in the hallway arch and sudden immersion in the dark; empty and still.

VII

I awoke with a sense of complete exhaustion.

I was soaked with perspiration, dressed only in my bottom undergarment. My clothes lay scattered across the floor, apparently thrown about in a frenzy. The bedclothes also lay in disordered heaps on the floor. From all appearances, I had gone insane the night before.

The light from the window annoyed me for some reason and, quickly, I shut my eyes, reluctant to believe it was morning again. I turned over onto my stomach and put my head beneath the pillow. I could still remember the enticing odor of her hair. The memory of it made my body shudder with odious craving.

Then a warmth began to cover my back and I raised myself up with a muttering frown. The sunlight was streaming through the windows onto my back. With a restless movement I pushed myself up, threw my legs over the side of the bed and got up to draw the shades.

It was a little better without the glare. I threw myself on the bed again, closed my eyes tightly and crowded the pillow over my head. I felt the light.

It sounds incredible, I know, but I felt it as surely as do certain creeper plants that climb towards the light without ever seeing it. And, in feeling light, I yearned all the more for darkness. I felt like some nocturnal creature somehow forced into brightness, repelled and pained by it.

I sat on the bed and looked around, a sound of unremitting complaint in my throat. I bit my lips, clenched and unclenched my hands, wanting to strike out violently at something, at anything. I found myself standing over an unlit candle, blowing sharply on it. I knew, even then, the senselessness of the act and yet I did it nevertheless, trying, inanely, to make an invisible flame go out so that night could return through its dark roads. Bringing back Clarissa.

Clarissa.

A clicking sound filled my throat and my body positively writhed. Not in pain or pleasure but in a combination of the two. I put my brother's robe over my body and wandered out into the silent hallway. There were no physical wants, no hunger, thirst, or other needs. I was a detached body, a comatose slave to the

tyranny which had shackled me and now refused to let me go.

I stood at the head of the stairway, listening intently, trying to imagine her gliding up to meet me, warm and vibrant in her mist of blue. *Clarissa*. I closed my eyes quickly, my teeth grated together and, for a split second, I felt my body stiffen with fright. For a moment I was returned to myself.

But then, in another breath, I was enslaved again. I stood there, feeling myself a part of the house, as much a portion of it as the beams or the windows. I breathed its breath, felt its soundless heartbeat in my own. I became at one with an inanimate body, knowing its past life, sensing the dead hands that had curled their fingers on the arms of the chairs, on banisters, on doorknobs, hearing the labored tread of invisible footsteps moving through the house, the laughter of long-consumed humour.

If, in those moments, I lost my soul, it became a part of the emptiness and stillness that surrounded me, an emptiness I could not sense nor a stillness feel for being drugged. Drugged with the formless presence of the past. I was no longer a living person. I was dead in all but those bodily functions which kept me from complete satisfaction.

Quietly, and without passion, the thought of killing myself drifted through my mind. It was gone in a moment but its passage had stirred no more in me than apathetic recognition. My thoughts were on the life beyond life. And present existence was no more than a minor obstruction which I could tumble with the slightest touch of razored steel, the minutest drop of poison. I had become the master of life for I could view its destruction with the most complete apathy.

Night. Night! When would it come? I heard my voice, thin and hoarse, crying out in the silence.

"Why does the day have to last so long!"

The words shocked me back again, for Saul had spoken them. I blinked, looked around me as if just realizing where I was. What was this terrible power over me? I tried to break its hold but, in the very effort, slipped back again.

To find myself once more in that strange coma which suspends the mortally ill in that slender portion of existence between life and death. I was hanging on a thread over the pit of everything that was hidden to me before. Now I could see and hear and the power to cut the thread was in my hands. I could let myself hang until the strands parted one by one and lowered me slowly down. Or I could wait until driven beyond endurance, then end it suddenly, cut myself loose and plunge down into the darkness; that signal darkness where she and hers remained always. Then I would have her maddening warmth. Maybe it was her coldness. Her comfort then. I could pass eternal moments with her and laugh at the robot world.

I wondered if it would help to get dead drunk and lose all consciousness till night.

I descended the stairs on unfeeling legs and sat for a long time before the mantel looking up at her. I had no idea what time it was nor did I care. Time was relative, even forgotten. I neither knew of it nor cared about it. Had she smiled at me then? Yes, her eyes glowed, how they glowed in the dimness. That smell again. Not pleasant yet something excitingly musky and pungent about it.

What was Saul to me? The idea filled my mind. He was no relation of mine. He was a stranger from another society, another flesh, another life. I felt complete dispassion toward him. You hate him, said the voice in my mind.

That was when it all collapsed like a flimsy house of cards.

For those words caused such a rebellion in my innermost mind that, suddenly, my eyes were cleared as though scales had fallen from them. I looked about, my head snapping crazily. What in God's name was I doing, still here in the house?

With a shiver of angry fear I jumped to my feet and ran upstairs to dress. As I passed the hall clock I saw with a start that it was past three in the afternoon.

As I dressed, normal sensations returned one by one. I felt the cold floor beneath my bare feet, became aware of hunger and thirst, heard the deep silence of the house.

Everything flooded over me. I knew why Saul had wanted to die, why he loathed the day and waited for the night with such angry impatience. I could explain it to him now and he would understand because I had been through it myself.

And, as I ran down the stairs, I thought about the dead of Slaughter House, so outraged at their own inexplicable curse that they tried to drag the living down into their endless hell.

Over, over!-exulted my mind as I locked the front door behind me and started through the misty rain to the hospital.

I did not see the shadow behind me, crouching on the porch.

VIII

When the woman at the hospital desk told me that Saul had been discharged two hours before my arrival, I was too stunned to speak. I clutched at the counter, staring at her, hearing myself tell her that she must be mistaken. My voice was hoarse, unnatural. The woman shook her head.

I sagged against the counter then, all the drive gone out of me. I felt very tired and afraid. A sob broke in my throat as I turned away and I saw people staring at me while I moved across the tile floor with unsteady motions. Everything

seemed to swirl about me. I staggered, almost fell. Someone clutched my arm and asked me if I were all right. I muttered something in reply and pulled away from the person without even noting if it were a man or a woman.

I pushed out through the door and into the gray light. It was raining harder and I pulled up my coat collar. Where was he? The question burned in my mind and the answer to it came quickly, too quickly. Saul was back in the house. I felt sure of it.

The idea made me start running up the dark street toward the trolley-car tracks. I ran for endless blocks. All I remember is the rain driving against my face and the gray buildings floating by. There were no people in the streets and all the taxicabs were full. It was getting darker and darker.

My legs almost buckled and I was thrown against a lamppost and clung to it, afraid of falling into the streaming gutter.

An ugly clanging filled my ears. I looked up, then chased after the trolley car and caught it at the next block. I handed the conductor a dollar and had to be called back for my change. I stood hanging from a black strap, swaying back and forth with the motion of the car, my mind tormented by thoughts of Saul alone in that house of horror.

The warm, stale air of the car began to make me sick to the stomach. I could smell the raincoats and the wet clothes of the people caught in the rain as well as the smell of dripping umbrellas and packages soaked. I closed my eyes and stood there, teeth clenched, praying that I would get home before it was too late.

I got off the car at last and ran up the block as fast as I could. The rain sprayed over my face and ran into my eyes, almost blinding me. I slipped and went sprawling on the sidewalk, skinning my hands and knees. I pushed up with a whine, feeling the clothes soaked against me. I kept running wildly, only sensing the direction by instinct until I stopped and saw through the thick veil of rain, the house in front of me, high and dark.

It seemed to crawl over the ground toward me and clutch me to itself for I found myself standing and shivering on the wooden porch. I coughed and felt the chill through my flesh.

I tried the door. At first I could not believe it. It was still locked and Saul had no key! I almost cried in gratitude. I ran down from the porch. Where was he then? I had to find him. I started down the path.

Then, as surely as if I had been tapped on the shoulder I whirled about and stared up at the porch. A flash of lightning illuminated the darkness and I saw the broken, jagged-edged window. My breath caught and I stared at it, my heart pounding like a heavy piston in my chest.

He was in there. Had she come already? Was he lying upstairs in bed smiling to

himself in the blackness, waiting for her luminous self to come and envelop him?

I had to save him. Without hesitation I ran up on the porch and unlocked the door, leaving it wide open so that we could escape.

I moved across the rug and onto the steps. The house was quiet. Even the storm seemed apart from it. The rushing sound of the rain seemed to grow less and less distinct. Then I turned with a gasp as the front door slammed shut behind me.

I was trapped. The thought drove barbs of fear into me and I almost ran down to try and escape. But I remembered Saul and fought to quicken resolution. I had conquered the house once and I could do it again. I had to. For him.

I started up the stairs again. Outside the flashes of lightning were like false neon trying to invade the austerity of the house. I held onto the banister tightly, muttering beneath my breath to keep attention from degrading into fright, afraid to let the spell of the house beset me again.

I reached the door to my brother's room. There I stopped and leaned against the wall, eyes closed. What if I found him dead? I knew the sight would unnerve me. The house might defeat me then, taking me in that moment of utter despair and twisting my soul from my grip.

I would not let myself conceive of it. I would not allow myself the realization that without Saul life was empty, a meaningless travesty. He was alive.

Nervously, my hands numbed with fright, I pushed open the door. The room was a stygian cave. My throat contracted and I took a deep breath. I clenched tight fists at my sides.

"Saul?" I called his name softly.

The thunder roared and my voice disappeared beneath the swell. A flash of lightning brought a split second of daylight into the room and I looked around quickly, hoping to see him. Then it was dark again and silent except for the endless rain falling on the windows and roof. I took another step across the rug, cautiously, my ears tense, trying to hear. Every sound made me start. I twitched and shuffled across the floor. Was he here? But he must be. If he were here in the house, this was the room he would be in.

"Saul?" I called, louder. "Saul, answer me."

I began to walk toward the bed.

Then the door slammed behind me and there was a rushing sound behind me in the darkness. I whirled to meet it. I felt his hand clamp on my arm.

"Saul!" I cried.

Lightning filled the room with hideous light and I saw his twisted white face, the candlestick held in his right hand.

Then he struck me a violent blow on the forehead, driving a wedge of agonizing pain into my brain. I felt his hand release me as I slumped to my knees and my face brushed against his bare leg as I fell forward. The last sound I heard before my mind fell into the darkness was laughing and laughing and laughing.

IX

I opened my eyes. I was still lying on the rug. Outside it was raining even harder. The sound of it was like the crashing of a waterfall. Thunder still rolled in the sky and flashes of lightning made the night brilliant.

In one flash I looked at the bed. The sight of the covers and sheets all thrown about insanely made me push up. Saul was downstairs with *her*!

I tried to get to my feet but the pain in my head drove me back to my knees. I shook my head feebly, running trembling hands over my cheeks, feeling the gouged wound in my forehead, the dried blood which had trickled down across one temple. I swayed back and forth on my knees, moaning. I seemed to be back in that void again, struggling to regain my hold on life. The power of the house surrounded me. The power which I knew was her power. A cruel and malignant vitality which tried to drink out the life force from me and draw me down into the pit.

Then, once more, I remembered Saul, my brother, and the remembrance brought me back the strength I needed.

"No!" I cried out as if the house had told me I was now its helpless captive. And I pushed to my feet, ignoring the dizziness, stumbling through a cloud of pain across the room, gasping for breath. The house was throbbing and humming, filled with that obnoxious smell.

I ran drunkenly for the door, found myself running into the bed. I drew back with almost a snarl at the numbing pain in my shins. I turned in the direction of the door and ran again. I did not even hold my arms ahead of me and had no chance to brace myself when I ran into the door dizzily.

The excruciating pain of my nose being near broken caused a howl of agony to pass my lips. Blood immediately began gushing down across my mouth and I had to keep wiping it away. I jerked open the door and ran into the hall, feeling myself on the border of insanity. The hot blood kept running down across my chin and I felt it dripping and soaking into my coat. My hat had fallen off but I still wore my raincoat over my suit.

I was too bereft of perception to notice that nothing held me back at the head of the stairs. I half ran, half slid down the stairs, goaded on by that humming, formless laughter which was music and mockery. The pain in my head was

terrible. Every downward step made it feel as if someone drove one more nail into my brain.

"Saul, Saul!" I cried out, running into the living room, gagging as I tried to call his name a third time.

The living room was dark, permeated with that sickly odour. It made my head reel but I kept moving. It seemed to thicken as I moved for the kitchen. I ran into the small room and leaned against the wall, almost unable to breathe, pinpoints of light spinning before my eyes.

Then, as lightning illumined the room I saw the left cupboard door wide open and, inside, a large bowl filled with what looked like flour. As I stared at it, tears rolled down my cheeks and my tongue felt like dry cloth in my mouth.

I backed out of the kitchen choking for breath, feeling as if my strength were almost gone. I turned and ran into the living room, still looking for my brother.

Then, in another flash of lightning, I looked at her portrait. It was different and the difference froze me to the spot. Her face was no longer beautiful. Whether it was shadow that did it or actual change, her expression was one of vicious cruelty. The eyes glittered, there was an insane cast to her smile. Even her hands, once folded in repose, now seemed more like claws waiting to strike out and kill.

It was when I backed away from her that I stumbled and fell over the body of my brother.

I pushed up to my knees and stared down in the blackness. One flash of lightning after another showed me his white, dead face, the smile of hideous knowledge on his lips, the look of insane joy in his wide-open eyes. My mouth fell open and breath caught in me. It seemed as if my world was ending. I could not believe it was true. I clutched at my hair and whimpered, almost believing that in a moment, Mother would wake me from my nightmare and I would look across at Saul's bed, smile at his innocent sleep and lie down again secure with the memory of his dark hair on the white pillow.

But it did not end. The rain slapped frenziedly at the windows and thunder drove deafening fists against the earth.

I looked up at the portrait. I felt as dead as my brother. I did not hesitate. Calmly I stood and walked to the mantel. There were matches there. I picked up the box.

Instantly, she divined my thoughts for the box was torn from my fingers and hurled against the wall. I dove for it and was tripped by some invisible force. Those cold hands clutched at my throat. I felt no fright but tore them away with a snarl and dove for the matches again. Blood began running faster and I spat out some.

I picked up the box. It was torn away again, this time to burst and spray

matches all over the rug. A great hum of anguish seemed to rock the house as I reached for a match. I was grabbed. I tore loose. I fell to my knees and slapped at the rug in the darkness as lightning ceased. My arms were held tightly. Something cold and wet ran around in my stomach.

With maniacal fury I pressed my teeth against a match I saw in the lightning and bit at the head. There was no rewarding flare. The house was trembling violently now and I heard rustlings about me as if she had called them all to fight me, to save their cursed existence.

I bit at another match. A white face stared at me from the rug and I spit blood at it. It disappeared. I tore one arm loose and grabbed a match. I jerked myself to the mantel and dragged the match across the rough wood. A speck of flame flared up in my fingers and I was released.

The throbbing seemed more violent now. But I knew it was helpless against flame. I protected the flame with my hand though, lest that cold wind come again and try to blow it out. I held the match against a magazine that was lying on a chair and it flared up. I shook it and the pages puffed into flame. I threw it down on the rug.

I went around in that light striking one match after another, avoiding the sight of Saul lying there. She had destroyed him but now I would destroy her forever.

I ignited the curtains. I started the rug to smouldering. I set fire to the furniture. The house rocked and a whistling sigh rose and ebbed like the wind.

At last I stood erect in the flaming room, my eyes riveted on the portrait. I walked slowly toward it. She knew my intentions for the house rocked even harder and a shrieking began that seemed to come from the walls. And I knew then that the house was controlled by her and that her power was in that portrait.

I drew it down from the wall. It shook in my very hands as if it were alive. With a shudder of repugnance I threw it on the flames.

I almost fell while the floor shuddered almost as if an earthquake were striking the land. But then it stopped and the portrait was burning and the last effect of her was gone. I was alone in an old burning house.

I did not want anyone to know about my brother. I did not want anyone to see his face like that.

So I lifted him and put him on the couch. I do not understand to this day how I could lift him up when I felt so weak. It was a strength not my own.

I sat at his feet, stroking his hand until the flames grew too hot. Then I rose. I bent over him and kissed him on the lips for a last goodbye. And I walked from the house into the rain.

And I never came back. Because there was nothing to ever come back for.

This is the end of the manuscript. There seems no adequate evidence to ascribe the events recounted as true. But the following facts, taken from the city's police files, might prove of interest.

In 1901, the city was severely shocked by the most wholesale murder ever perpetrated in its history.

At the height of a party being held at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Marlin Slaughter and their daughter Clarissa, an unknown person poisoned the punch by placing a very large amount of arsenic in it. Everyone died. The case was never solved although various theories were put forth as to its solution. One thesis had it that the murderer was one of those who died.

As to the identity of this murderer, supposition had it that it was not a murderer but a murderess. Although nothing definite exists to go by, there are several testimonies which refer to that poor child Clarissa" and indicate that the young woman had been suffering for some years from a severe mental aberration which her parents had tried to keep a secret from the neighbours and the authorities. The party in mention was supposed to have been planned to celebrate what her parents took for the recovery of her faculties.

As to the body of the young man later supposed to be in the wreckage, a thorough search has revealed nothing. It may be that the entire story is imagination, fabricated by the one brother in order to conceal the death of the other, said death probably being unnatural. Thus, the older brother knowing the story of the house tragedy may have used it for a fantastic evidence in his favour.

*Whatever the truth, the older brother has never been heard of again either in this city or in any of the adjacent localities.
And that's the story S.D.M.*

11 - WET STRAW

It began some months after his wife died.

He had moved into a boarding house. There he lived a sheltered life; sale of her bonds had provided money. A book a day, concerts, solitary meals, visits to the museum-these sufficed. He listened to his radio and napped and thought a good deal. Life was good enough.

One night he put down his book and undressed. He turned out the lights and opened the window. He sat down on the bed and stared a moment at the floor. His eyes ached a little. Then he lay down and put his arms behind his head. There was a cold draft from the window, so he pulled the covers over his head and closed his eyes.

It was very still. He could hear his own regular breathing. The warmth began to cover him. The heat fondled his body and soothed it. He sighed heavily and smiled.

In an instant, his eyes were open.

There was a thin breeze stroking his cheek, and he could smell something like wet straw. It was not to be mistaken.

Reaching out, he could touch the wall and feel the breeze from the window. Yet, under the covers, where there had been only warmth before, was another breeze. And a damp, chilling smell of wet straw.

He threw the covers from him and lay on the bed, breathing harshly.

Then he laughed in his mind. A dream, a nightmare. Too much reading. Bad food.

He pulled up the covers and closed his eyes. He kept his head outside the blankets and slept.

The next morning he forgot about it. He had breakfast and went to the museum. There he spent the morning. He visited all the rooms and looked at everything.

When he was about to leave, he felt a desire to go back and look at a painting he had only glanced at before.

He stopped in front of it.

It was a painting of a countryside. There was a big barn down in the valley.

He began to breathe heavily, and his fingers played on his tie. How ridiculous, he thought after a moment, that such a thing should make me nervous.

He turned away. At the door he looked back at the painting.

The barn had frightened him. Only a barn, he thought, a barn in a painting.

After dinner he returned to his room.

As soon as he opened the door he remembered the dream. He went to the bed. He drew up the blanket and the sheets and shook them.

There was no smell of wet straw. He felt like a fool.

That night, when he went to bed, he left the window closed. He turned out the lights and got in bed and pulled the covers over his head.

At first it was the same. Silent and breathless and the creeping warmth.

Then the breeze began again and he distinctly felt his hair ruffled by it. He could smell wet straw. He stared into the blackness and breathed through his mouth so he wouldn't have to smell the straw.

Somewhere in the dark, he saw a square of greyish light.

It's a window, he thought, suddenly.

He looked longer and his heart jumped as a sudden flash of light showed in the window. It was like lightning. He listened. He smelled the wet straw.

He heard it starting to rain.

He became frightened and pulled the covers off his head.

The warm room was around him. It was not raining. It was oppressively hot because the window was closed.

He stared at the ceiling and wondered why he was having this illusion.

Again he pulled up the blanket to make sure. He lay still and kept his eyes tightly closed.

The smell was in his nostrils again. The rain was beating violently on the window. He opened his eyes and watched it and made out sheets of rain in the flashes. Then, rain began to beat above him, too, on a wooden roof. He was in some place with a wooden roof and wet straw.

He was in a barn.

That was why the picture had frightened him. But why frightened?

He tried to touch the window, but he couldn't reach it. The breeze blew on his hand and arm. He wanted to touch the window. Maybe, he delighted in the thought, maybe open it and stick his head out in the rain and then pull down the covers quickly to see if his hair were wet.

He began to sense himself surrounded by space. There was no feeling of confinement in the bed. He felt the mattress, yet it was as though he lay on it in an open place. The breeze blew over his entire body. And the smell was more pronounced.

He listened. He heard a squeak and then a horse whinnying. He listened a while longer.

Then he realized he couldn't feel the whole mattress.

It felt as though he were lying on a cold wooden floor from his waist down.

He reached out his hands in alarm and felt the edge of the blankets. He pulled them down.

He was covered with sweat and his pyjamas stuck to his body. He got out of bed and turned on the light. A refreshing breeze came through the window when

he opened it.

His legs shook as he walked, and he had to grab at the dresser to keep from falling.

In the mirror he saw his face pale with fear. He held up his hand and watched it shake. His throat was dry.

He went to the bathroom and got a drink of water. Then he went to the room and looked down at his bed. Nothing there but the tangled blanket and sheets and the stain where he had perspired. He held up the blanket and the sheets. He shook them before the light and examined them minutely. There was nothing.

He took up a book and read for the rest of the night.

The next day he went to the museum again and looked at the picture.

He tried to remember if he had ever been in a barn. Had it been raining and had he stared out a window at the lightning?

He remembered.

It was on his honeymoon. They had gone for a walk and been caught in the rain and stayed in a barn until it stopped. There had been a horse down in the stall and mice running and wet straw.

But what did it mean? There was no reason to remember it now.

That night he was afraid to go to bed. He put it off. At last, -when his eyes would not stay open, he lay down fully dressed and left the window closed. He didn't use a blanket.

He slept heavily and there was no dream.

Toward early morning, he woke up. It was just getting light. Without thinking, he pulled a blanket off the chair and threw it over himself.

There was no wait. He was suddenly in the barn.

There was no sound. It was not raining. There was a gray light in the window. Could it be that it was also morning in his imaginary barn?

He smiled drowsily. It was all too charming. He would have to try it in the afternoon to see if the barn were fully lighted.

He started to pull the blanket off his head, when there was a rustle by his side.

He caught his breath. His heart seemed to stop and there was a tingling in his scalp.

A soft sigh reached his ears.

Something warm and moist brushed over his hand.

With a scream, he flung off the blanket and jumped onto the floor.

He stood there staring at the bed and clutching the blanket in his hands. His heart struck with gigantic beats.

He sank down weakly on the bed. The sun was just rising.

For a week, he slept sitting up in a chair. At last, he had to have a good night's rest and lay down on the bed, fully dressed. He would never use a blanket again.

Sleep came, dreamless and black.

He didn't know what time it was when he woke up. A sob caught in his throat. *He was in the barn again.* Lightning flashed in the window and rain was pounding on the roof.

He felt around in dread, but there was no blanket anywhere. His hands slapped at the air, frenziedly.

Suddenly, he looked at the window. If he could open it, he might escape! He stretched out his hand as far as he could. Closer. Closer. He was almost there. Another inch and his fingers would touch it.

'John.'

A sudden reflex made his hand plunge through the glass. He felt the rain spattering across the back of his hand and his wrist burned terribly. He jerked back his hand and stared in terror at where the voice had come from.

Something white stirred at his side and a warm hand caressed his arm.

"John," came the murmur. *John.*

He couldn't speak. He reached around clutching agonizingly for his blanket. But only the breeze blew over his fingers. There was a cold wooden floor under him.

He whimpered in fright. His name was spoken again.

Then the lightning flashed and he saw his wife lying by him, smiling at him.

Suddenly, the edge of the blanket was in his hand, and pulling it down, he rolled off the bed onto the floor.

Something was running across his wrist; there was a dull ache in his arm.

He stood up and put on the light. The bright glare filled the room.

He saw his arm covered with blood. He picked a piece of glass from his wrist and dropped it on the floor in horror.

On his lower arm, the prints of her fingers were red.

He tore the sheet from the bed and ran down the hall to the bathroom. He washed the blood off and poured iodine into the thick gash and bandaged it. The burning made him dizzy. Drops of cold sweat ran into his eyes.

One of the boarders came in. John told him he had cut himself accidentally. When the man saw the blood running he ran and called a doctor on the telephone.

John sat on the edge of the bathtub and watched his blood dripping on the tiles.

The next day the cut was cleaned and bandaged.

The doctor was dubious about the explanation. John told him he did it with a knife; but there was no knife to be found, and there were thick patterns of blood all over the sheets and blanket.

He was told to stay in his room and keep his arm still.

He read most of the day and thought about how he had cut himself on a dream.

The thought of her excited him. She was still beautiful.

Memories became vivid.

They had lain in each other's arms in the straw and listened to the rain. He couldn't remember what they'd said.

He was not afraid she was coming back. His outlook on life was realistic. She was dead and buried.

It was some aberration of the mind. Some mental climax that had put itself off until now.

Then he looked at his wrist and saw the bandage.

It hadn't been her fault though. She didn't ask him to crash his hand through the glass.

Perhaps he could be with her in one existence and have her money in another.

Something held him from it. It *had* been frightening. The wet straw and the darkness, the mice and the rain, the bone stiffening chill.

He made up his mind what he would do.

That night he turned out the lights early. He got on his knees beside the bed.

He put his head under the covers. If anything went wrong he had only to pull away quickly.

He waited.

Soon he smelled the straw and heard the rain and looked for her. He called her name softly.

There was a rustling. A warm hand caressed his cheek. He started at first. Then he smiled. Her face appeared and she put her cheek against his. The perfume of her hair intoxicated him.

Words filled his mind.

John. We are always one. Promise? Never part? If one of us dies the other will wait? If I die you'll wait and I'll find a way to come to you? I'll come to you and take you with me.

And now I have gone. You made me that drink and I died. And you opened the window so the breeze would come in. And now I am back.

He began to shake.

Her voice became harsher, he could hear her teeth grinding. Her breath was faster. Her fingers touched his face. They ran through his hair and fondled his neck.

He began to moan. He asked her to let go. There was no answer. She breathed faster still. He tried to pull away. He felt the floor of his room with his feet. He tried hard to pull his head from under the blanket. But her grasp was very strong.

She began to kiss his lips. Her mouth was cold, her eyes wide open. He stared into them while her breath mingled with his.

Then she threw back her head and she was laughing and lightning was bursting through the window. Rain was thundering on the roof and the mice shrieked and the horse stamped and made the barn shake. Her fingers clenched on his neck. He pulled with all his might and gritted his teeth and wrenched from her grasp. There was a sudden pain, and he rolled across the floor.

When the landlady came in two days later to clean, he was in the same position. His arms were sprawled in the dried puddle of blood and his body was taut and cold. His head was not to be found.

12 - DANCE OF THE DEAD

I wanna RIDE!

with my Rota-Mota honey

by my SIDE!

As we whiz along the highway

"We will HUG and SNUGGLE and we'll have a little STRUGGLE!"

Struggle (strug'l)

Act of promiscuous loveplay; usage evolved during W.W.III.

Double beams spread buttery lamplight on the highway. Rotor-Motors Convertible, Model C, 1987, rushed after it. Light spurted ahead, yellow glowing. The car pursued with a twelve-cylinderead snarling pursuit. Night blotted in behind, jet and still. The car sped on. ST. LOUIS-10.

"I wanna FLY!" they sang, "with the Rota-Mota apple of my EYE!" they sang.

"It's the only way of living..."

The quartet singing

Len, 23.

Bud, 24.

Barbara, 20.

Peggy, 18.

Len with Barbara, Bud with Peggy.

Bud at the wheel, snapping around tilted curves, roaring up black-shouldered hills, shooting the car across silent flatlands. At the top of the three lungs (the fourth gentler), competing with wind that buffeted their heads, that whipped their hair to lashing threads-singing: "You can have your walkin' under MOONLIGHT BEAMS!

At a hundred miles an hour let me DREAM my DREAMS!"

Needle quivering at 130, two 5-m.p.h. notches from gauge's end. A sudden dip! Their young frames jolted and the thrown-up laughter of three was wind-swept into night. Around a curve, darting up and down a hill, flashing across a leveled plain-an ebony bullet skimming earth.

"In my *ROTORY, MOTORY, FLOATERY*, drivin' machi-i-i-i-ine!"

YOU'LL BE A FLOATER IN YOUR ROTOR-MOTOR.

In the back seat

"Have a jab, Bab."

"Thanks, I had one after supper" (pushing away needle fixed to eye-dropper).

In the front seat

"You meana tell me this is the first time you ever been t' Saint Loo!"

"But I just started school in September."

"Hey, you're a *frosh!*"

Back seat joining front seat

"Hey, *frosh*, have a mussle-tussle."

(Needle passed forward, eye bulb quivering amber juice.)

"Live it, girl!"

Mussle-Tussle (mus'l-tus'l)

Slang for the result of injecting a drug into a muscle; usage evolved during W.W.III.

Peggy's lips failed at smiling. Her fingers twitched.

"No, thanks, I'm not..."

"Come *on*, frosh!" Len leaning hard over the seat, white-browed under black blowing hair. Pushing the needle at her face. "Live it, girl! Grab a li'l mussle-tussle!"

"I'd rather not," said Peggy. "If you don't-"

"What's *'at*, frosh?" yelled Len and pressed his leg against the pressing leg of Barbara.

Peggy shook her head and golden hair flew across her cheeks and eyes. Underneath her yellow dress, underneath her white brassiere, underneath her young breast-a heart throbbed heavily. *Watch your step, darling, that's all we ask. Remember, you're all we have in the world now.* Mother words drumming at her; the needle making her draw back into the seat.

"Come on, frosh!"

The car groaned its shifting weight around a curve and centrifugal force pressed Peggy into Bud's lean hip. His hand dropped down and fingered at her leg. Underneath her yellow dress, underneath her sheer stocking-flesh crawled. Lips failed again; the smile was a twitch of red.

"Frosh, live it up!"

"Lay off, Len, jab your own dates."

"But we gotta teach frosh how to mussle-tussle!"

"Lay off, I said! She's my date!"

The black car roaring, chasing its own light. Peggy anchored down the feeling hand with hers. The wind whistled over them and grabbed down chilly fingers at their hair. She didn't want his hand there but she felt grateful to him.

Her vaguely frightened eyes watched the road lurch beneath the wheels. In back, a silent struggle began, taut hands rubbing, parted mouths clinging. Search for the sweet elusive at 120 miles-per-hour.

"*Rota-Mota honey*," Len moaned the moan between salivary kisses. In the front seat a young girl's heart beat unsteadily. ST. LOUIS-6.

"No kiddin', you never been to Saint Loo?"

"No, I..."

"Then you never saw the loopy's dance?"

Throat contracting suddenly. "No, I... Is that what... we're going to-"

"Hey, frosh never saw the loopy's dance!" Bud yelled back.

Lips parted, slurping; skirt was adjusted with blasé aplomb. "No kiddin'!" Len fired up the words. "Girl, you haven't *lived!*"

"Oh, she's *got* to see *that*," said Barbara, buttoning a button.

"Let's go there then!" yelled Len. "Let's give frosh a thrill!"

"Good enough," said Bud and squeezed her leg. "Good enough up here, right, Peg?"

Peggy's throat moved in the dark and the wind clutched harshly at her hair. She'd heard of it, she'd read of it but never had she thought she'd-

Choose your school friends carefully darling. Be very careful.

But when no one spoke to you for two whole months? When you were lonely and wanted to talk and laugh and be alive? And someone spoke to you finally and asked you to go out with them?

"I yam Popeye, the sailor man!" Bud sang.

In back, they crowed artificial delight. Bud was taking a course in Pre-War Comics and Cartoons-2. This week the class was studying Popeye. Bud had fallen in love with the one-eyed seaman and told Len and Barbara all about him; taught them dialogue and song.

"I yam Popeye, the sailor man! I like to go swimmin' with bow-legged women! I yam Popeye, the sailor man!"

Laughter. Peggy smiled falteringly. The hand left her leg as the car screeched around a curve and she was thrown against the door. Wind dashed blunt coldness in her eyes and forced her back, blinking. 110-115-120 miles-per-hour. ST. LOUIS-3. *Be very careful, dear.*

Popeye cocked wicked eye.

"O, Olive Oyl, you is my sweet patootie."

Elbow nudging Peggy. "You be Olive Oyl-you."

Peggy smiled nervously. "I can't."

"Sure!"

In the back seat, Wimpy came up for air to announce, "I will gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger today."

Three fierce voices and a faint fourth raged against the howl of wind. "I fights to the *fin*-ish 'cause I eats my *spin*-ach! I yam Popeye, the sailor man! *Toot! Toot!*

"I yam what I yam," reiterated Popeye gravely and put his hand on the yellow-skirted leg of Olive Oyl. In the back, two members of the quartet returned to

feeling struggle.

ST. LOUIS-1. The black car roared through the darkened suburbs. "On with the nosies!" Bud sang out. They all took out their plasticate nose-and-mouth pieces and adjusted them.

*ANCE IN YOUR PANTS WOULD BE A PITY!
WEAR YOUR NOSIES IN THE CITY!!*

Ance (anse)

Slang for anticivilian germs; usage evolved during W.W.III.

"You'll like the loopy's dance!" Bud shouted to her over the shriek of wind. "It's sensaysh!"

Peggy felt a cold that wasn't of the night or of the wind. *Remember, darling, there are terrible things in the world today. Things you must avoid.*

"Couldn't we go somewhere else?" Peggy said but her voice was inaudible. She heard Bud singing, "I like to go swimmin' with bow-legged women!" She felt his hand on her leg again while, in the back, was the silence of grinding passion without kisses.

Dance of the dead. The words trickled ice across Peggy's brain.

ST. LOUIS.

The black car sped into the ruins.

It was a place of smoke and blatant joys. Air resounded with the bleating of revelers and there was a noise of sounding brass spinning out a cloud of music-1987 music, a frenzy of twisted dissonances. Dancers, shoe-horned into the tiny square of open floor, ground pulsing bodies together. A network of bursting sounds lanced through the mass of them; dancers singing:

"Hurt me! Bruise me! Squeeze me TIGHT!
Scorch my blood with hot DELIGHT!
Please abuse me every NIGHT!
LOVER, LOVER, LOVER, be a *beast-to-me!*"

Elements of explosion restrained within the dancing bounds-instead of fragmenting, quivering. "Oh, be a beast, beast, beast, *Beast*, BEAST to me!"

"How is *this*, Olive old goil?" Popeye inquired of the light of his eye as they struggled after the waiter. "Nothin' like this in Sykesville, eh?"

Peggy smiled but her hand in Bud's felt numb. As they passed by a murky lighted table, a hand she didn't see felt at her leg. She twitched and bumped against a hard knee across the narrow aisle. As she stumbled and lurched through the hot and smoky, thick-aired room, she felt a dozen eyes disrobing her, abusing her. Bud jerked her along and she felt her lips trembling.

"Hey, how about that!" Bud exulted as they sat. "Right by the stage!"

From cigarette mists, the waiter plunged and hovered, pencil poised, beside their table.

"What'll it be!" His questioning shout cut through cacophony.

"Whiskey-water!" Bud and Len paralleled orders, then turned to their dates. "What'll it be!" the waiter's request echoed from their lips.

"*Green Swamp!*" Barbara said and, "*Green Swamp* here!" Len passed it along. Gin, Invasion Blood (1987 Rum), lime juice, sugar, mint spray, splintered ice-a popular college girl drink.

"What about you, honey?" Bud asked his date.

Peggy smiled. "Just some ginger ale," she said, her voice a fluttering frailty in the massive clash and fog of smoke.

"What?" asked Bud and, "What's that, didn't hear!" the waiter shouted.

"Ginger ale."

"What?"

"Ginger ale!"

"*GINGER ALE!*" Len screamed it out and the drummer, behind the raging curtain of noise that was the band's music, almost heard it. Len banged down his fist. *One-Two-Three!*

CHORUS: *Ginger Ale was only twelve years old! Went to church and was as good as gold. Till that day when-*

"Come *on*, come *on!*" the waiter squalled. "Let's have that order, kids! I'm busy!"

"Two whisky-waters and two Green Swamps!" Len sang out and the waiter was gone into the swirling maniac mist.

Peggy felt her young heart flutter helplessly. *Above all, don't drink when you're out on a date. Promise us that, darling, you must promise us that.* She tried to

push away instructions etched in brain.

"How you like this place, honey? *Loopy*, ain't it?" Bud fired the question at her; a red-faced, happy-faced Bud.

Loopy (loo pi)

Common alter. of L.U.P. (Lifeless Undeath Phenomenon).

She smiled at Bud, a smile of nervous politeness. Her eyes moved around, her face inclined and she was looking up at the stage. *Loopy*. The word scalpeled at her mind. *Loopy, loopy*.

The stage was five yards deep at the radius of its wooden semicircle. A waist-high rail girdled the circumference, two pale purple spotlights, unlit, hung at each rail end. Purple on white-the thought came. *Darling, isn't Sykesville Business College good enough? No! I don't want to take a business course, I want to major in art at the University!*

The drinks were brought and Peggy watched the disembodied waiter's arm thud down a high, green-looking glass before her. *Presto!*-the arm was gone. She looked into the murky Green Swamp depths and saw chipped ice bobbing.

"A toast! Pick up your glass, Peg!" Bud clarioned.

They all clinked glasses:

"To lust primordial!" Bud toasted.

"To beds inviolate!" Len added.

"To flesh insensate!" Barbara added a third link.

Their eyes zeroed in on Peggy's face, demanding. She didn't understand.

"*Finish it!*" Bud told her, plagued by freshman sluggishness.

"To... u-us," she faltered.

"How o-*rig*-inal," stabbed Barbara and Peggy felt heat licking up her smooth cheeks. It passed unnoticed as three Youths of America with Whom the Future Rested gurgled down their liquor thirstily. Peggy fingered at her glass, a smile printed to lips that would not smile unaided.

"Come on, *drink*, girl!" Bud shouted to her across the vast distance of one foot. "Chuggalug!"

"Live it, girl," Len suggested abstractedly, fingers searching once more for soft leg. And finding, under table, soft leg waiting.

Peggy didn't want to drink, she was afraid to drink. Mother words kept pounding-*never on a date, honey, never*. She raised the glass a little.

"Uncle Buddy will help, will help!"

Uncle Buddy leaning close, vapor of whisky haloing his head. Uncle Buddy pushing cold glass to shaking young lips. "Come on, Olive Oyl, old goil! Down

the hatch!"

Choking sprayed the bosom of her dress with Green Swamp droplets. Flaming liquid trickled into her stomach, sending offshoots of fire into her veins.

Bangity boom crash smash POW!! The drummer applied the coup de grace to what had been, in ancient times, a lover's waltz. Lights dropped and Peggy sat coughing and tear-eyed in the smoky cellar club.

She felt Bud's hand clamp strongly on her shoulder and, in the murk, she felt herself pulled off balance and felt Bud's hot wet mouth pressing at her lips. She jerked away and then the purple spots went on and a mottle-faced Bud drew back, gurgling, "I fights to the finish," and reaching for his drink.

"Hey, the loopy now, the loopy!" Len said eagerly, releasing exploratory hands.

Peggy's heart jolted and she thought she was going to cry out and run thrashing through the dark, smoke-filled room. But a sophomore hand anchored her to the chair and she looked up in white-faced dread at the man who came out on the stage and faced the microphone which, like a metal spider, had swung down to meet him.

"May I have your attention, ladies and gentlemen," he said, a grim-faced, sepulchral-voiced man whose eyes moved out over them like flicks of doom. Peggy's breath was labored, she felt thin lines of Green Swamp water filtering hotly through her chest and stomach. It made her blink dizzily. *Mother*. The word escaped cells of the mind and trembled into conscious freedom. *Mother, take me home*.

"As you know, the act you are about to see is not for the faint of heart, the weak of will." The man plodded through the words like a cow enmired. "Let me caution those of you whose nerves are not what they ought to be-*leave now*. We make no guarantees of responsibility. We can't even afford to maintain a house doctor."

No laughter appreciative. "Cut the crap and get off stage," Len grumbled to himself. Peggy felt her fingers twitching.

"As you know," the man went on, his voice gilded with learned sonority, "this is not an offering of mere sensation but an honest scientific demonstration."

"Loophole for Loopy's!" Bud and Len heaved up the words with the thoughtless reaction of hungry dogs salivating at a bell.

It was, in 1987, a comeback so rigidly standard it had assumed the status of a catechism answer. A crenel in the postwar law allowed the L.U.P. performance if it was orally prefaced as an exposition of science. Through this legal chink had poured so much abusing of the law that few cared any longer. A feeble government was grateful to contain infractions of the law at all.

When hoots and shoutings had evaporated in the smoke-clogged air, the man,

his arms upraised in patient benediction, spoke again.

Peggy watched the studied movement of his lips, her heart swelling, then contracting in slow, spasmodic beats. An iciness was creeping up her legs. She felt it rising toward the threadlike fires in her body and her fingers twitched around the chilly moisture of the glass. *I want to go, please take me home*-Will-spent words were in her mind again.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the man concluded, "brace yourselves."

A gong sounded its hollow, shivering resonance, the man's voice thickened and slowed.

"The L.U. Phenomenon!"

The man was gone; the microphone had risen and was gone. Music began; a moaning brassiness, all muted. A jazzman's conception of *the palpable obscure* mounted on a pulse of thumping drum. A dolor of saxophone, a menace of trombone, a harnessed bleating of trumpet-they raped the air with stridor.

Peggy felt a shudder plaiting down her back and her gaze dropped quickly to the murky whiteness of the table. Smoke and darkness, dissonance and heat surrounded her.

Without meaning to, but driven by an impulse of nervous fear, she raised the glass and drank. The glacial trickle in her throat sent another shudder rippling through her. Then further shoots of liquored heat budded in her veins and a numbness settled in her temples. Through parted lips, she forced out a shaking breath.

Now a restless, murmuring movement started through the room, the sound of it like willows in a sloughing wind. Peggy dared not lift her gaze to the purpled silence of the stage. She stared down at the shifting glimmer of her drink, feeling muscle strands draw tightly in her stomach, feeling the hollow thumping of her heart. *I'd like to leave, please let's leave.*

The music labored toward a rasping dissonant climax, its brass components struggling, in vain, for unity.

A hand stroked once at Peggy's leg and it was the hand of Popeye, the sailor man, who muttered rousily, "Olive Oyl, you is my goil." She barely felt or heard. Automatonlike, she raised the cold and sweating glass again and felt the chilling in her throat and then the flaring network of warmth inside her.

SWISH!

The curtain swept open with such a rush, she almost dropped her glass. It thumped down heavily on the table, swamp water cascading up its sides and raining on her hand. The music exploded shrapnel of ear-cutting cacophony and

her body jerked. On the tablecloth, her hands twitched white on white while claws on uncontrollable demand pulled up her frightened eyes.

The music fled, frothing behind a wake of swelling drum rolls.

The nightclub was a wordless crypt, all breathing checked.

Cobwebs of smoke drifted in the purple light across the stage.

No sound except the muffled, rolling drum.

Peggy's body was a petrification in its chair, smitten to rock around her leaping heart, while, through the wavering haze of smoke and liquored dizziness, she looked up in horror to where it stood.

It had been a woman.

Her hair was black, a framing of snarled ebony for the tallow mask that was her face. Her shadow-rimmed eyes were closed behind lids as smooth and white as ivory. Her mouth, a lipless and unmoving line, stood like a clotted sword wound beneath her nose. Her throat, her shoulders and her arms were white, were motionless. At her sides, protruding from the sleeve ends of the green transparency she wore, hung alabaster hands.

Across this marble statue, the spotlights coated purple shimmer.

Still paralyzed, Peggy stared up at its motionless features, her fingers knitted in a bloodless tangle on her lap. The pulse of drumbeats in the air seemed to fill her body, its rhythm altering her heartbeat.

In the black emptiness behind her, she heard Len muttering, "I love my wife but, oh, you corpse," and heard the wheeze of helpless snickers that escaped from Bud and Barbara. The cold still rose in her, a silent tidal dread.

Somewhere in the smoke-fogged darkness, a man cleared viscid nervousness from his throat and a murmur of appreciative relief strained through the audience.

Still no motion on the stage, no sound but the sluggish cadence of the drum, thumping at the silence like someone seeking entrance at a far-off door. The thing that was a nameless victim of the plague stood palely rigid while the distillation sluiced through its blood-clogged veins.

Now the drum throbs hastened like the pulsebeat of a rising panic. Peggy felt the chill begin to swallow her. Her throat started tightening, her breathing was a string of lip-parted gasps.

The loopy's eyelid twitched.

Abrupt, black, straining silence webbed the room. Even the breath choked off in Peggy's throat when she saw the pale eyes flutter open. Something creaked in the stillness; her body pressed back unconsciously against the chair. Her eyes were wide, unblinking circles that sucked into her brain the sight of the thing that had been a woman.

Music again; a brass-throated moaning from the dark, like some animal made of welded horns mewling its derangement in a midnight alley.

Suddenly, the right arm of the loopy jerked at its side, the tendons suddenly contracted. The left arm twitched alike, snapped out, then fell back and thudded in purple-white limpness against the thigh. The right arm out, the left arm out, the right, the left-right-left-right-like marionette arms twitching from an amateur's dangling strings.

The music caught the time, drum brushes scratching out a rhythm for the convulsions of the loopy's muscles. Peggy pressed back further, her body numbed and cold, her face a livid, staring mask in the fringes of the stage light.

The loopy's right foot moved now, jerking up inflexibly as the distillation constricted muscles in its leg. A second and a third contraction caused the leg to twitch, the left leg flung out in a violent spasm and then the woman's body lurched stiffly forward, filming the transparent silk to its light and shadow.

Peggy heard the sudden hiss of breath that passed the clenching teeth of Bud and Len and a wave of nausea sprayed foaming sickness up her stomach walls. Before her eyes, the stage abruptly undulated with a watery glitter and it seemed as if the flailing loopy was headed straight for her.

Gasping dizzily, she pressed back in horror, unable to take her eyes from its now agitated face.

She watched the mouth jerk to a gaping cavity, then a twisted scar that split into a wound again. She saw the dark nostrils twitching, saw writhing flesh beneath the ivory cheeks, saw furrows dug and undug in the purple whiteness of the forehead. She saw one lifeless eye wink monstrosly and heard the gasp of startled laughter in the room.

While music blared into a fit of grating noise, the woman's arms and legs kept jerking with convulsive cramps that threw her body around the purpled stage like a full-sized rag doll given spastic life.

It was nightmare in an endless sleep. Peggy shivered in helpless terror as she watched the loopy's twisting, leaping dance. The blood in her had turned to ice; there was no life in her but the endless, pounding stagger of her heart. Her eyes were frozen spheres staring at the woman's body writhing white and flaccid underneath the clinging silk.

Then, something went wrong.

Up till then, its muscular seizures had bound the loopy to an area of several yards before the amber flat which was the background for its paroxysmal dance. Now its erratic surging drove the loopy toward the stage-encircling rail.

Peggy heard the thump and creaking stain of wood as the loopy's hip collided with the rail. She cringed into a shuddering knot, her eyes still raised fixedly to

the purple-splashed face whose every feature was deformed by throes of warping convulsion.

The loopy staggered back and Peggy saw and heard its leprous hands slapping with a fitful rhythm at its silk-scaled thighs.

Again it sprang forward like a maniac marionette and the woman's stomach thudded sickeningly into the railing wood. The dark mouth gaped, clamped shut and then the loopy twisted through a jerking revolution and crashed back against the rail again, almost above the table where Peggy sat.

Peggy couldn't breathe. She sat rooted to the chair, her lips a trembling circle of stricken dread, a pounding of blood at her temples as she watched the loopy spin again, its arms a blur of flailing white.

The lurid bleaching of its face dropped toward Peggy as the loopy crashed into the waist-high rail again and bent across its top. The mask of lavender-rained whiteness hung above her, dark eyes twitching open into a hideous stare.

Peggy felt the floor begin to move and the livid face was blurred with darkness, then reappeared in a burst of luminosity. Sound fled on brass-shoed feet, then plunged into her brain again-a smearing discord.

The loopy kept on jerking forward, driving itself against the rail as though it meant to scale it. With every spastic lurch, the diaphanous silk fluttered like a film about its body and every savage collision with the railing tautened the green transparency across its swollen flesh. Peggy looked up in rigid muteness at the loopy's fierce attack on the railing, her eyes unable to escape the wild distortion of the woman's face with its black frame of tangled, snapping hair.

What happened then happened in a blurring passage of seconds.

The grim-faced man came rushing across the purple-lighted stage; the thing that had been a woman went crashing, twitching, flailing at the rail, doubling over it, the spasmodic hitching flinging up its muscle-knotted legs.

A clawing fall.

Peggy lurched back in her chair and the scream that started in her throat was forced back into a strangled gag as the loopy came crashing down onto the table, its limbs a thrash of naked whiteness.

Barbara screamed, the audience gasped and Peggy saw, on the fringe of vision, Bud jumping up, his face a twist of stunned surprise.

The loopy flopped and twisted on the table like a new-caught fish. The music stopped, grinding into silence; a rush of agitated murmur filled the room and blackness swept in brain-submerging waves across Peggy's mind.

Then the cold white hand slapped across her mouth, the dark eyes stared at her in purple light and Peggy felt the darkness flooding.

The horror-smoked room went turning on its side.

Consciousness. It flickered in her brain like gauze-veiled candlelight. A murmuring of sound, a blur of shadow before her eyes.

Breath dripped like syrup from her mouth.

"Here, Peg."

She heard Bud's voice and felt the chilly metal of a flask neck pressed against her lips. She swallowed, twisting slightly at the trickle of fire in her throat and stomach, then coughed and pushed away the flask with deadened fingers.

Behind her, a rustling movement. "Hey, she's *back*," Len said. "Ol' Olive Oyl is back."

"You feel all right?" asked Barbara.

She felt all right. Her heart was like a drum hanging from piano wire in her chest, slowly, slowly beaten. Her hands and feet were numb, not with cold but with a sultry torpor. Thoughts moved with a tranquil lethargy, her brain a leisurely machine imbedded in swaths of woolly packing.

She felt all right.

Peggy looked across the night with sleepy eyes. They were on a hilltop, the braked convertible crouching on a jutting edge. Far below, the country slept, a carpet of light and shadow beneath the chalky moon.

An arm snake moved around her waist. "Where are we?" she asked him in a languid voice.

"Few miles outside school," Bud said. "How d'ya feel, honey?"

She stretched, her body a delicious strain of muscles. She sagged back, limp, against his arm.

"*Wonderful*," she murmured with a dizzy smile and scratched the tiny itching bump on her left shoulder. Warmth radiated through her flesh; the night was a sabled glow. There seemed *somewhere* to be a memory, but it crouched in secret behind folds of thick content.

"Woman, you were *out*," laughed Bud; and Barbara added and Len added, "Were you!" and "Olive Oyl went *plunko*!"

"Out?" Her casual murmur went unheard.

The flask went around and Peggy drank again, relaxing further as the liquor needled fire through her veins.

"Man, I never saw a loopy dance like that!" Len said.

A momentary chill across her back, then warmth again. "Oh," said Peggy,

"that's right. I forgot."

She smiled

"That was what I calls a grand finale!" Len said, dragging back his willing date, who murmured, "*Lenny* boy."

"L.U.P.," Bud muttered, nuzzling at Peggy's hair. "Son of a gun." He reached out idly for the radio knob.

L.U.P. (Lifeless Undead Phenomenon)

This freak of physiological abnormality was discovered during the war when, following certain germ-gas attacks, many of the dead troops were found erect and performing the spasmodic gyrations which, later, became known as the "loopy's" (L.U.P.'s) dance. The particular germ spray responsible was later distilled and is now used in carefully controlled experiments which are conducted only under the strictest of legal license and supervision.

Music surrounded them, its melancholy fingers touching at their hearts. Peggy leaned against her date and felt no need to curb exploring hands. Somewhere, deep within the jellied layers of her mind, there was something trying to escape. It fluttered like a frantic moth imprisoned in congealing wax, struggling wildly but only growing weaker in attempt as the chrysalis hardened.

Four voices sang softly in the night.

*"If the world is here tomorrow
I'll be waiting, dear, for you
If the stars are there tomorrow
I'll be wishing on them too."*

Four young voices singing, a murmur in immensity. Four bodies, two by two, slackly warm and drugged. A singing, an embracing-a wordless accepting.

*"Star light, star bright
Let there be another night."*

The singing ended but the song went on.

A young girl sighed.

"Isn't it romantic?" said Olive Oyl.

13 - THE CHILDREN OF NOAH

It was just past three a.m. when Mr Ketchum drove past the sign that read *Zachry: pop. 67*. He groaned. Another in an endless string of Maine seaside towns. He closed his eyes hard a second, then opened them again and pressed down on the accelerator. The Ford surged forward under him. Maybe, with luck, he'd reach a decent motel soon. It certainly wasn't likely there'd be one in *Zachry: pop. 67*.

Mr Ketchum shifted his heavy frame on the seat and stretched his legs. It had been a sour vacation. Motoring through New England's historic beauty, communing with nature and nostalgia was what he'd planned. Instead, he'd found only boredom, exhaustion and over-expense.

Mr Ketchum was not pleased.

The town seemed fast asleep as he drove along its Main Street. The only sound was that of the car's engine, the only sight that of his raised head beams splaying out ahead, lighting up another sign. *Speed 15 Limit*.

'Sure, sure,' he muttered disgustedly, pressing down on the gas pedal. Three o'clock in the morning and the town fathers expected him to creep through their lousy hamlet. Mr Ketchum watched the dark buildings rush past his window.

Goodbye *Zachry*, he thought. Farewell, *pop. 67*.

Then the other car appeared in the rear-view mirror. About half a block behind, a sedan with a turning red spotlight on its roof. He knew what kind of car it was. His foot curled off the accelerator and he felt his heartbeat quicken. Was it possible they hadn't noticed how fast he was going?

The question was answered as the dark car pulled up to the Ford and a man in a big hat leaned out of the front window. Pull over!' he barked.

Swallowing dryly, Mr Ketchum eased his car over to the kerb. He drew up the emergency brake, turned the ignition key and the car was still. The police car nosed in towards the kerb and stopped. The right front door opened.

The glare of Mr Ketchum's headlights outlined the dark figure approaching. He felt around quickly with his left foot and stamped down on the knob, dimming the lights. He swallowed again. Damned nuisance this. Three a.m. in the middle of nowhere and a hick policeman picks him up for speeding. Mr Ketchum gritted his teeth and waited.

The man in the dark uniform and wide-brimmed hat leaned over into the window. 'Licence.'

Mr Ketchum slid a shaking hand into his inside pocket and drew out his billfold. He felt around for his licence. He handed it over, noticed how expressionless the face of the policeman was. He sat there quietly while the policeman held a flashlight beam on the licence.

'From New Jersey.'

'Yes, that... that's right,' said Mr Ketchum.

The policeman kept staring at the licence. Mr Ketchum stirred restlessly on the seat and pressed his lips together. 'It hasn't expired,' he finally said.

He saw the dark head of the policeman lift. Then, he gasped as the narrow circle of flashlight blinded him. He twisted his head away.

The light was gone. Mr Ketchum blinked his watering eyes.

'Don't they read traffic signs in New Jersey?' the policeman asked.

'Why, I... You mean the sign that said p-population sixty-seven?'

'No, I don't mean that sign,' said the policeman.

'Oh.' Mr Ketchum cleared his throat. 'Well, that's the only sign I saw,' he said.

'You're a bad driver then.'

'Well, I'm-'

'The sign said the speed limit is fifteen miles an hour. You were doing fifty.'

'Oh. I... I'm afraid I didn't see it.'

'The speed limit is fifteen miles an hour whether you see it or not.'

'Well... at - at *this* hour of the morning?'

'Did you see a timetable on the sign?' the policeman asked.

'No, of course not. I mean, I didn't see the sign at all/

'*Didn't* you?'

Mr Ketchum felt hair prickling along the nape of his neck. 'Now, now see here,' he began faintly, then stopped and stared at the policeman. 'May I have my licence back?' he finally asked when the policeman didn't speak.

The policeman said nothing. He stood on the street, motionless.

'May I -?' Mr Ketchum started.

'Follow our car,' said the officer abruptly and strode away.

Mr Ketchum stared at him, dumbfounded. *Hey wait!* he almost yelled. The officer hadn't even given him back his licence. Mr Ketchum felt a sudden coldness in his stomach.

'What *is* this?' he muttered as he watched the policeman getting back into his car. The police car pulled away from the kerb, its roof light spinning again.

Mr Ketchum followed.

'This is ridiculous,' he said aloud. They had no right to do this. Was this the Middle Ages? His thick lips pressed into a jaded mouth line as he followed the

police car along Main Street.

Two blocks up, the police car turned. Mr Ketchum saw his headlights splash across a glass store front. *Hand's Groceries* read the weather-worn letters.

There were no lamps on the street. It was like driving along an inky passage. Ahead were only the three red eyes of the police car's rear lights and spotlight; behind only impenetrable blackness. The end of a perfect day, thought Mr Ketchum; picked up for speeding in Zachry, Maine. He shook his head and groaned. Why hadn't he just spent his vacation in Newark; slept late, gone to shows, eaten, watched television?

The police car turned right at the next corner, then, a block up, turned left again and stopped. Mr Ketchum pulled up behind it as its lights went out. There was no sense in this. This was only cheap melodrama. They could just as easily have fined him on Main Street. It was the rustic mind. Debasing someone from a big city gave them a sense of vengeful eminence.

Mr Ketchum waited. Well, he wasn't going to haggle. He'd pay his fine without a word and depart. He jerked up the hand brake. Suddenly he frowned, realising that they could fine him anything they wanted. They could charge him \$500 if they chose! The heavy man had heard stories about small town police, about the absolute authority they wielded. He cleared his throat viscidly. Well, this is absurd, he thought. What foolish imagination.

The policeman opened the door.

'Get out,' he said.

There was no light in the street or in any building. Mr Ketchum swallowed. All he could really see was the black figure of the policeman.

'Is this the - station?' he asked.

Turn out your lights and come on,' said the policeman.

Mr Ketchum pushed in the chrome knob and got out. The policeman slammed the door. It made a loud, echoing noise-as if they were inside an unlighted warehouse instead of on a street. Mr Ketchum glanced upward. The illusion was complete. There were neither stars nor moon. Sky and earth ran together blackly.

The policeman's hard fingers clamped on his arm. Mr Ketchum lost balance a moment, then caught himself and fell into a quick stride beside the tall figure of the policeman.

'Dark here,' he heard himself saying in a voice not entirely familiar.

The policeman said nothing. The other policeman fell into step on the other side of him. Mr Ketchum told himself: These damned hick-town Nazis were doing their best to intimidate him. Well they wouldn't succeed.

Mr Ketchum sucked in a breath of the damp, sea-smelling air and let it shudder out. A crumby town of 67 and they have two policemen patrolling the streets at

three in the morning. Ridiculous.

He almost tripped over the step when they reached it. The policeman on his left side caught him under the elbow.

'Thank you,' Mr Ketchum muttered automatically. The policeman didn't reply. Mr Ketchum licked his lips. Cordial oaf, he thought and managed a fleeting smile to himself. There, that was better. No point in letting this get to him.

He blinked as the door was pulled open and, despite himself, felt a sigh of relief filtering through him. It was a police station all right. There was the podiumed desk, there a bulletin board, there a black, pot-bellied stove unlit, there a scarred bench against the wall, there a door, there the floor covered with cracked and grimy linoleum that had once been green.

'Sit down and wait,' said the first policeman.

Mr Ketchum looked at his lean, angled face, his swarthy skin. There was no division in his eyes between iris and pupil. It was all one darkness. He wore a dark uniform that fitted him loosely.

Mr Ketchum didn't get to see the other policeman because both of them went into the next room. He stood watching the closed door a moment. Should he leave, drive away? No, they'd have his address on the licence. Then again, they might actually want him to attempt to leave. You never knew what sort of warped minds these small-town police had. They might even - shoot him down if he tried to leave.

Mr Ketchum sat heavily on the bench. No, he was letting imagination run amuck. This was merely a small town on the Maine seacoast and they were merely going to fine him for-

Well, why didn't they fine him then? What was all this play-acting? The heavy man pressed his lips together. Very well, let them play it the way they chose. This was better than driving anyway. He closed his eyes. I'll just rest them, he thought.

After a few moments he opened them again. It was damned quiet. He looked around the dimly lit room. The walls were dirty and bare except for a clock and one picture that hung behind the desk. It was a painting - more likely a reproduction - of a bearded man. The hat he wore was a seaman's hat. Probably one of Zachry's ancient mariners. No; probably not even that. Probably a Sears Roebuck print: *Bearded Seaman*.

Mr Ketchum grunted to himself. Why a police station should have such a print was beyond him. Except, of course, that Zachry was on the Atlantic. Probably its main source of income was from fishing. Anyway, what did it matter? Mr Ketchum lowered his gaze.

In the next room he could hear the muffled voices of the two policemen. He

tried to hear what they were saying but he couldn't. He glared at the closed door. Come *on*, will you? he thought. He looked at the clock again. Three twenty-two. He checked it with his wrist watch. About right. The door opened and the two policemen came out.

One of them left. The remaining one - the one who had taken Mr Ketchum's licence - went over to the raised desk and switched on the gooseneck lamp over it, drew a big ledger out of the top drawer and started writing in it. *At last*, thought Mr Ketchum.

A minute passed.

'I - ' Mr Ketchum cleared his throat. 'I beg your - '

His voice broke off as the cold gaze of the policeman raised from the ledger and fixed on him.

'Are you... That is, am I to be - fined now?'

The policeman looked back at the ledger. 'Wait,' he said.

'But it's past three in the mor - ' Mr Ketchum caught himself. He tried to look coldly belligerent. 'Very well/ he said curtly. 'Would you kindly tell me how long it will be?'

The policeman kept writing in the ledger. Mr Ketchum sat there stiffly, looking at him. *Insufferable*, he thought. This was the last damned time he'd ever go within a hundred miles of this damned New England.

The policeman looked up. 'Married?' he asked.

Mr Ketchum stared at him.

'Are you married?'

'No, I - it's on the licence,' Mr Ketchum blurted. He felt a tremor of pleasure at his retort and, at the same time, an impaling of strange dread at talking back to the man.

'Family in Jersey?' asked the policeman.

'Yes. I mean no, Just a sister in Wiscons - '

Mr Ketchum didn't finish. He watched the policeman write it down. He wished he could rid himself of this queasy distress.

'Employed?' asked the policeman.

Mr Ketchum swallowed. 'Well,' he said, 'I - I have no one particular em - '

'Unemployed,' said the policeman.

'Not at all; not at *all*,' said Mr Ketchum stiffly. 'I'm a - a free-lance salesman. I purchase stocks and lots from...' His voice faded as the policeman looked at him. Mr Ketchum swallowed three times before the lump stayed down. He realised that he was sitting on the very edge of the bench as if poised to spring to the defence of his life. He forced himself to settle back. He drew in a deep

breath. Relax, he told himself. Deliberately, he closed his eyes. There. He'd catch a few Winks. May as well make the best of this, he thought.

The room was still except for the tinny, resonant ticking of the clock. Mr Ketchum felt his heart pulsing with slow, dragging beats. He shifted his heavy frame uncomfortably on the hard bench. *Ridiculous*, he thought.

Mr Ketchum opened his eyes and frowned. That damned picture. You could almost imagine that bearded seaman was looking at you.

'Uhr

Mr Ketchum's mouth snapped shut, his eyes jerked open, irises flaring. He started forward on the bench, then shrank back.

A swarthy-faced man was bent over him, hand on Mr Ketchum's shoulder.

'Yes?' Mr Ketchum asked, heart jolting.

The man smiled.

'Chief Shipley,' he said. 'Would you come into my office?'

'Oh,' said Mr Ketchum. 'Yes. Yes.'

He straightened up, grimacing at the stiffness in his back muscles. The man stepped back and Mr Ketchum pushed up with a grunt, his eyes moving automatically to the wall clock. It was a few minutes past four.

'Look,' he said, not yet awake enough to feel intimidated. 'Why can't I pay my fine and leave?'

Shipley's smile was without warmth.

'We run things a little different here in Zachry,' he said.

They entered a small musty-smelling office.

'Sit down,' said the chief, walking around the desk while Mr Ketchum settled into a straight-backed chair that creaked.

'I don't understand why I can't pay my fine and leave.'

'In due course,' said Shipley.

'But -' Mr Ketchum didn't finish. Shipley's smile gave the 'impression of being no more than a diplomatically veiled warning. Gritting his teeth, the heavy man cleared his throat and waited while the chief looked down at a sheet of paper on his desk. He noticed how poorly Shipley's suit fitted. Yokels, the heavy man thought, don't even know how to dress.

'I see you're not married,' Shipley said.

Mr Ketchum said nothing. Give them a taste of their own no-talk medicine he decided.

'Have you friends in Maine?' Shipley asked.

'Why?'

'Just routine questions, Mr Ketchum,' said the chief. Your only family is a sister

in Wisconsin?'

Mr Ketchum looked at him without speaking. What had all this to do with a traffic violation?

'Sir?' asked Shipley.

'I already told you; that is, I told the officer. I don't see -'

'Here on business?'

Mr Ketchum's mouth opened soundlessly.

'Why are you asking me all these questions?' he asked. *Stop shaking!* he ordered himself furiously.

'Routine. Are you here on business?'

'I'm on my vacation. And I don't see this at all! I've been patient up to now but, *blast it*, I demand to be fined and released!'

'I'm afraid that's impossible,' said the chief.

Mr Ketchum's mouth fell open. It was like waking up from a nightmare and discovering that the dream was still going on. 'I - I don't understand,' he said.

'You'll have to appear before the judge.'

'But that's ridiculous.'

'Is it?'

'Yes, it is. I'm a citizen of the United States. I demand my rights.'

Chief Shipley's smile faded.

'You limited those rights when you broke our law,' he said. 'Now you have to pay for it as we declare.'

Mr Ketchum stared blankly at the man. He realised that he was completely in their hands. They could fine him anything they pleased or put him in jail indefinitely. All these questions he'd been asked; he didn't know why they'd asked them but he knew that his answers revealed him as almost rootless, with no one who cared if he lived or -

The room seemed to totter. Sweat broke out on his body.

'You can't *do* this,' he said; but it was not an argument.

'You'll have to spend the night in jail,' said the chief. 'In the morning you'll see the judge.'

'But this is ridiculous!' Mr Ketchum burst out. '*Ridiculous!*'

He caught himself. 'I'm entitled to one phone call,' he said quickly. 'I can make a telephone call. It's my legal right,'

'It would be,' said Shipley, 'if there was any telephone service in Zachry.'

When they took him to his cell, Mr Ketchum saw a painting in the hall. It was of the same bearded seaman. Mr Ketchum didn't notice if the eyes followed him or not.

Mr Ketchum stirred. A look of confusion lined his sleep-numbered face. There was a clanking sound behind him; he reared up on his elbow.

A policeman came into the cell and set down a covered tray.

'Breakfast,' he said. He was older than the other policemen, even older than Shipley. His hair was iron-grey, his cleanly shaved face seamed around the mouth and eyes. His uniform fitted him badly.

As the policeman started relocking the door, Mr Ketchum asked, 'When do I see the judge?'

The policeman looked at him a moment. 'Don't know,' he said and turned away.

'Wait!' Mr Ketchum called out.

The receding footsteps of the policeman sounded hollowly on the cement floor. Mr Ketchum kept staring at the spot where the policeman had been. Veils of sleep peeled from his mind.

He sat up, rubbed deadened fingers over his eyes and held up his wrist. Seven minutes past nine. The heavy man grimaced. By God, they were going to hear about this! His nostrils twitched. He sniffed, started to reach for the tray; then pulled back his hand.

'No,' he muttered. He wouldn't eat their damned food. He sat there stiffly, doubled at the waist, glaring at his sock-covered feet.

His stomach grumbled uncooperatively.

'Well,' he muttered after a minute. Swallowing, he reached over and lifted off the tray cover.

He couldn't check the *oh* of surprise that passed his lips.

The three eggs were fried in butter, bright yellow eyes focused straight on the ceiling, ringed about with long, crisp lengths of meaty, corrugated bacon. Next to them was a platter of four book-thick slices of toast spread with creamy butter swirls, a paper cup of jelly leaning on them. There was a tall glass of frothy orange juice, a dish of strawberries bleeding in alabaster cream. Finally a tall pot from which wavered the pungent and unmistakable fragrance of freshly brewed coffee.

Mr Ketchum picked up the glass of orange juice. He took a few drops in his mouth and rolled them experimentally over his tongue. The citric acid tingled deliciously on his warm tongue. He swallowed. If it was poisoned it was by a master's hand. Saliva tided in his mouth. He suddenly remembered that, just before he was picked up, he'd been meaning to stop at a cafe for food.

While he ate, warily but decidedly, Mr Ketchum tried to figure out the motivation behind this magnificent breakfast.

It was the rural mind again. They regretted their blunder. It seemed a flimsy notion, but there it was. The food was superb. One thing you had to say for these

New Englanders; they could cook like a son-of-a-gun. Breakfast for Mr Ketchum was usually a sweet roll, heated, and coffee. Since he was a boy in his father's house he hadn't eaten a breakfast like this.

He was just putting down his third cup of well-creamed coffee when footsteps sounded in the hall. Mr Ketchum smiled. Good timing, he thought. He stood.

Chief Shipley stopped outside the cell. 'Had your breakfast?'

Mr Ketchum nodded. If the chief expected thanks he was in for a sad surprise. Mr Ketchum picked up his coat.

The chief didn't move.

'Well ...?' said Mr Ketchum after a few minutes. He tried to put it coldly and authoritatively. It came out somewhat less.

Chief Shipley looked at him expressionlessly. Mr Ketchum felt his breath faltering.

'May I inquire -?' he began.

'Judge isn't in yet,' said Shipley.

'But...' Mr Ketchum didn't know what to say.

'Just came into tell you,' said Shipley. He turned and was gone.

Mr Ketchum was furious. He looked down at the remains of his breakfast as if they contained the answer to this situation. He drummed a fist against his thigh. *Insufferable!* What were they trying to do - intimidate him? Well, by God-
- they were succeeding.

Mr Ketchum walked over to the bars. He looked up and down the empty hallway. There was a cold knot inside him. The food seemed to have turned to dry lead in his stomach. He banged the heel of his right hand once against the cold bar. By God! By *God!*

It was two o'clock in the afternoon when Chief Shipley and the old policeman came to the cell door. Wordlessly the policeman opened it. Mr Ketchum stepped into the hallway and waited again, putting on his coat while the door was relocked.

He walked in short, inflexible strides between the two men, not even glancing at the picture on the wall. 'Where are we going?' he asked.

'Judge is sick,' said Shipley. 'We're taking you out to his house to pay your fine.'

Mr Ketchum sucked in his breath. He wouldn't argue with them; he just wouldn't. 'All right,' he said. 'If that's the way you have to do it.'

'Only way to do it,' said the chief, looking ahead, his face an expressionless mask.

Mr Ketchum pressed down the corners of a slim smile. This was better. It was almost over now. He'd pay his fine and clear out.

It was foggy outside. Sea mist rolled across the street like driven smoke. Mr

Ketchum pulled on his hat and shuddered. The damp air seemed to filter through his flesh and dew itself around his bones. Nasty day, he thought. He moved down the steps, eyes searching for his Ford.

The old policeman opened the back door of the police car and Shipley gestured towards the inside.

'What about *my* car?' Mr Ketchum asked.

'We'll come back here after you see the judge,' said Shipley.

'Oh. I...'

Mr Ketchum hesitated. Then he bent over and squeezed into the car, dropping down on the back seat. He shivered as the cold of the leather pierced trouser wool. He edged over as the chief got in.

The policeman slammed the door shut. Again that hollow sound, like the slamming of a coffin lid in a crypt. Mr Ketchum grimaced as the simile occurred to him.

The policeman got into the car and Mr Ketchum heard the motor cough into liquid life. He sat there breathing slowly and deeply while the policeman out-choked warmth into the engine. He looked out the window at his left.

The fog was *just* like smoke. They might have been parked in a burning garage. Except for that bone-gripping dampness. Mr Ketchum cleared his throat. He heard the chief shift on the seat beside him.

'Cold,' Mr Ketchum said, automatically.

The chief said nothing.

Mr Ketchum pressed back as the car pulled away from the kerb, V-turned and started slowly down the fog-veiled street. He listened to the crisp sibilance of the tyres on wet paving, the rhythmic swish of the wipers as they cleared off circle segments on the misted windshield.

After a moment he looked at his watch. Almost three. Half a day shot in this blasted Zachry.

He looked out through the window again as the town ghosted past. He thought he saw brick buildings along the kerb but he wasn't sure. He looked down at his white hands, then glanced over at Shipley. The chief was sitting stiffly upright on the seat, staring straight ahead. Mr Ketchum swallowed. The air seemed stagnant in his lungs.

On Main Street the fog seemed thinner. Probably the sea breezes, Mr Ketchum thought. He looked up and down the street. All the stores and offices looked closed. He glanced at the other side of the street. Same thing.

'Where is everybody?' he asked.

'What?'

'I said where *is* everybody?'

'Home,' the chief said.

'Rut it's Wednesday,' said Mr Ketchum. 'Aren't your -stores open?'

'Bad day,' said Shipley. 'Not worth it.'

Mr Ketchum glanced at the sallow faced chief, then withdrew his look hastily. He felt cold premonition spidering in his stomach again. What in God's name *is* this? he asked himself. It had been bad enough in the cell. Here, tracking through this sea of mist, it was altogether worse.

'That's right,' he heard his nerve-sparked voice saying. There are only sixty-seven people, aren't there?'

The chief said nothing.

'How... h-how old is Zachry?'

In the silence he heard the chiefs finger joints crackle dryly.

'Hundred fifty years,' said Shipley.

'That old,' said Mr Ketchum. He swallowed with effort. His throat hurt a little. Come *on*, he told himself. *Relax*.

'How come it's named Zachry?' The words spilled out, uncontrolled.

'Noah Zachry founded it,' said the chief.

'Oh. Oh. I see. I guess that picture in the station...?'

That's right,' said Shipley.

Mr Ketchum blinked. So that was Noah Zachry, founder of this town they were driving through -

- *block after block after block*. There was a cold, heavy sinking in Mr Ketchum's stomach as the idea came to him.

In a town so big, why were there only 67 people?

He opened his mouth to ask it, then couldn't. The answer might be wrong.

'Why are there only -?' The words came out anyway before he could stop them. His body jolted at the shock of hearing them.

'What?'

'Nothing, nothing. That is - ' Mr Ketchum drew in a shaking breath. No help for it. He had to know.

'How come there are only sixty-seven?'

'They go away,' said Shipley.

Mr Ketchum blinked. The answer came as such an anticlimax. His brow furrowed. Well, what else? he asked himself defensively. Remote antiquated, Zachry would have little attraction for its younger generations. Mass gravitation to more interesting places would be inevitable.

The heavy man settled back against the seat. Of course. Think how much I want to leave the dump, he thought, and I don't even live here.

His gaze slid forward through the windshield, caught by something. A banner hanging across the street, barbecue tonight. Celebration, he thought. They probably went berserk every fortnight and had themselves a rip roaring taffy pull or fishnet-mending orgy.

'Who was Zachry anyway?' he asked. The silence was getting to him again.

'Sea captain,' said the chief.

'Oh?'

'Whaled in the South Seas,' said Shipley.

Abruptly, Main Street ended. The police car veered left on to a dirt road. Out the window Mr Ketchum watched shadowy bushes glide by. There was only the sound of the engine labouring in second and of gravelly dirt spitting out from under the tyres. Where does the judge live, on a mountain top? He shifted his weight and grunted.

The fog began thinning now. Mr Ketchum could see grass and trees, all with a greyish cast to them. The car turned and faced the ocean. Mr Ketchum looked down at the opaque carpet of fog below. The car kept turning. It faced the crest of the hill again.

Mr Ketchum coughed softly. 'Is... uh, that the judge's house up there?' he asked.

'Yes,' the chief answered.

'High,' said Mr Ketchum.

The car kept turning on the narrow, dirt road, now facing the ocean, now Zachry, now the bleak, hill-topping house. It was a greyish white house, three storeys high, at each end of it the crag of an attic tower. It looked as old as Zachry itself, thought Mr Ketchum. The car turned. He was facing the fog-crusted ocean again.

Mr Ketchum looked down at his hands. Was it a deception of the light or were they really shaking? He tried to swallow but there was no moisture in his throat and he coughed instead, rattlingly. This was so *stupid*, he thought; there's no reason in the world for this. He saw his hands clench together.

The car was moving up the final rise towards the house now. Mr Ketchum felt his breaths shortening. *I don't want to go*, he heard someone saying in his mind. He felt a sudden urge to shove out the door and run. Muscles tensed emphatically.

He closed his eyes. For God's sake, *stop* it! he yelled at himself. There was nothing wrong about this but his distorted interpretation of it. These were modern times. Things had explanations and people had reasons. Zachry's people had a reason too; a narrow distrust of city dwellers. This was their socially

acceptable revenge. That made sense. After all -

The car stopped. The chief pushed open the door on his side and got out. The policeman reached back and opened the other door for Mr Ketchum. The heavy man found one of his legs and foot to be numb. He had to clutch at the top of the door for support. He stamped the foot on the ground.

'Went to sleep,' he said.

Neither of the men answered. Mr Ketchum glanced at the house; he squinted. He had seen a dark green drape slip back into place? He winced and made a startled noise as his arm was touched and the chief gestured towards the house. The three men started towards it.

'I, uh... don't have much cash on me, I'm afraid/ he said. 'I hope a traveller's check will be all right.'

'Yes,' said the chief.

They went up to the porch steps, stopped in front of the door. The policeman turned a big, brass key-head and Mr Ketchum heard a bell ring tinnily inside. He stood looking through the door curtains. Inside, he could make out the skeletal form of a hat rack. He shifted weight and the boards creaked under him. The policeman rang the bell again.

'Maybe he's - too sick,' Mr Ketchum suggested faintly.

Neither of the men looked at him. Mr Ketchum felt his muscles tensing. He glanced back over his shoulder. Could they catch him if he ran for it?

He looked back disgustedly. You pay your fine and you leave, he explained patiently to himself. That's all; you pay your fine and you leave.

Inside the house there was dark movement. Mr Ketchum looked up, startled in spite of himself. A tall woman was approaching the door.

The door opened. The woman was thin, wearing an ankle-length black dress with a white oval pin at her throat. Her face was swarthy, seamed with threadlike lines. Mr Ketchum slipped off his hat automatically.

'Come in,' said the woman.

Mr Ketchum stepped into the hall.

'You can leave your hat there,' said the woman, pointing towards the hat rack that looked like a tree ravaged by flame. Mr Ketchum dropped his hat over one of the dark pegs. As he did, his eye was caught by a large painting near the foot of the staircase. He started to speak but the woman said, 'This way.'

They started down the hall. Mr Ketchum stared at the painting as they passed it.

'Who's that woman,' he asked, 'standing next to Zachry?'

'His wife,' said the chief.

'But she-'

Mr Ketchum's voice broke off suddenly as he heard a whimper rising in his throat. Shocked, he drowned it out with a sudden clearing of the throat. He felt ashamed of himself. Still... Zachry's wife?

The woman opened a door. 'Wait in here,' she said.

The heavy man walked in. He turned to say something to the chief. Just in time to see the door shut.

'Say, uh...' He walked to the door and put his hand on the knob. It didn't turn.

He frowned. He ignored the pile-driver beats of his heart. 'Hey, what's going on?' Cheerily bluff, his voice echoed off the walls. Mr Ketchum turned and looked around. The room was empty. It was a square empty room.

He turned back to the door, lips moving as he sought the proper words.

'Okay,' he said, abruptly, 'it's very -' He twisted the knob sharply. 'Okay, it's a very funny joke.' By God, he was mad. 'I've taken all I'm -'

He whirled at the sound, teeth bared.

There was nothing. The room was still empty. He looked around dizzily. What was that sound? A dull sound, like water rushing.

'Hey,' he said automatically. He turned to the door. 'Hey!' he yelled, 'cut it out! Who do you think you are anyway?'

He turned on weakening legs. The sound was louder. Mr Ketchum ran a hand over his brow. It was covered with sweat. It was warm in there.

'Okay, okay,' he said, 'it's a fine joke but -'

Before he could go on, his voice had corkscrewed into an awful, wracking sob. Mr Ketchum staggered a little. He stared at the room. He whirled and fell back against the door. His out flung hand touched the wall and jerked away.

It was hot.

'*Huh?*' he asked incredulously.

This was impossible. This was a joke. This was their deranged idea of a little joke. It was a game they played. Scare the City Slicker was the name of the game.

'Okay!' he yelled. 'Okay? It's funny, it's very funny! Now let me out of here or there's going to be trouble!'

He pounded at the door. Suddenly he kicked it. The room was getting hotter. It was almost as hot as an -

Mr Ketchum was petrified. His mouth sagged open.

The questions they'd asked him. The loose way the clothes fit everyone he'd met. The rich food they'd given him to eat. The empty streets. The savage like swarthy colouring of the men, of the woman. The way they'd all looked at him. And the woman in the painting, Noah Zachry's wife - *a native woman with her*

teeth filed to a point.

BARBECUE TONIGHT.

Mr Ketchum screamed. He kicked and pounded on the door. He threw his heavy body against it. He shrieked at the people outside.

'Let me out! *Let me out!* LET... ME... OUT!'

The worst part about it was, he just couldn't believe it was really happening.

14 - THE HOLIDAY MAN

"You'll be late, " she said.

He leaned back tiredly in his chair.

"I know," he answered.

They were in the kitchen having breakfast. David hadn't eaten much. Mostly, he'd drunk black coffee and stared at the tablecloth. There were thin lines running through it that looked like intersecting highways.

"Well?" she said.

He shivered and took his eyes from the tablecloth.

"Yes," he said. "All right."

He kept sitting there.

"David," she said.

"I know, I know," he said, "I'll be late." He wasn't angry. There was no anger left in him.

"You certainly will," she said, buttering her toast. She spread on thick raspberry jam, then bit off a piece and chewed it cracklingly.

David got up and walked across the kitchen. At the door he stopped and turned. He stared at the back of her head.

"Why couldn't I?" he asked again.

"Because you can't," she said. "That's all."

"But *why?*"

"Because they need you," she said. "Because they pay you well and you couldn't do anything else. Isn't it obvious?"

"They could find someone else."

"Oh, stop it," she said. "You know they couldn't."

He closed his hands into fists. "Why should I be the one?" he asked.

She didn't answer. She sat eating her toast.

"Jean?"

"There's nothing more to say," she said, chewing. She turned around. "Now, will you go?" she said. "You shouldn't be late today."

David felt a chill in his flesh.

"No," he said, "not today."

He walked out of the kitchen and went upstairs. There, he brushed his teeth, polished his shoes and put on a tie. Before eight he was down again. He went into the kitchen.

"Goodbye," he said.

She tilted up her cheek for him and he kissed it. "Bye, dear," she said. "Have a-" She stopped abruptly.

"-nice day?" he finished for her. "Thank you." He turned away. "I'll have a lovely day."

Long ago he had stopped driving a car. Mornings he walked to the railroad station. He didn't even like to ride with someone else or take a bus.

At the station he stood outside on the platform waiting for the train. He had no newspaper. He never bought them any more. He didn't like to read the papers.

"Mornin', Garret."

He turned and saw Henry Coulter who also worked in the city. Coulter patted him on the back.

"Good morning," David said.

"How's it goin'?" Coulter asked.

"Fine. Thank you."

"Good. Lookin' forward to the Fourth?"

David swallowed. "Well..." he began.

"Myself, I'm takin' the family to the woods," said Coulter. "No lousy fireworks for us. Pilin' into the old bus and headin' out till the fireworks are over."

"Driving," said David.

"Yes, sir," said Coulter. "Far as we can."

It began by itself. No, he thought; *not now*. He forced it back into its darkness.

"-tising business," Coulter finished.

"What?" he asked.

"Said I trust things are goin' well in the advertising business."

David cleared his throat.

"Oh, yes," he said. "Fine." He always forgot about the lie he'd told Coulter.

When the train arrived he sat in the No Smoking car, knowing that Coulter

always smoked a cigar en route. He didn't want to sit with Coulter. Not now.

All the way to the city he sat looking out the window. Mostly he watched road and highway traffic; but, once, while the train rattled over a bridge, he stared down at the mirror like surface of a lake. Once he put his head back and looked up at the sun.

He was actually to the elevator when he stopped.

"Up?" said the man in the maroon uniform. He looked at David steadily. "Up?" he said. Then he closed the rolling doors.

David stood motionless. People began to cluster around him. In a moment, he turned and shouldered by them, pushing through the revolving door. As he came out, the oven heat of July surrounded him. He moved along the sidewalk like a man asleep. On the next block he entered a bar.

Inside, it was cold and dim. There were no customers. Not even the bartender was visible. David sank down in the shadow of a booth and took his hat off. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

He couldn't do it. He simply could not go up to his office. No matter what Jean said, no matter what anyone said. He clasped his hands on the table edge and squeezed them until the ringers were pressed dry of blood. He just *wouldn't*.

"Help you?" asked a voice.

David opened his eyes. The bartender was standing by the booth, looking down at him.

"Yes, uh... beer," he said. He hated beer but he knew he had to buy something for the privilege of sitting in the chilly silence undisturbed. He wouldn't drink it.

The bartender brought the beer and David paid for it. Then, when the bartender had gone, he began to turn the glass slowly on the table top. While he was doing this it began again. With a gasp, he pushed it away. No!, he told it, savagely.

In a while he got up and left the bar. It was past ten. That didn't matter of course. They knew he was always late. They knew he always tried to break away from it and never could.

His office was at the back of the suite, a small cubicle furnished only with a rug, sofa, and a small desk on which lay pencils and white paper. It was all he needed. Once, he'd had a secretary but he hadn't liked the idea of her sitting outside the door and listening to him scream.

No one saw him enter. He let himself in from the hall through a private door. Inside, he relocked the door, then took off his suit coat and laid it across the desk. It was stuffy in the office so he walked across the floor and pulled up the window.

Far below, the city moved. He stood watching it. How many of them? he

thought.

Sighing heavily, he turned. Well, he was here. There was no point in hesitating any longer. He was committed now. The best thing was to get it over and clear out.

He drew the blinds, walked over to the couch and lay down. He fussed a little with the pillow, then stretched once and was still. Almost immediately, he felt his limbs going numb.

It began.

He did not stop it now. It trickled on his brain like melted ice. It rushed like winter wind. It spun like blizzard vapor. It leaped and ran and billowed and exploded and his mind was filled with it. He grew rigid and began to gasp, his chest twitching with breath, the beating of his heart a violent stagger. His hands drew in like white talons, clutching and scratching at the couch. He shivered and groaned and writhed. Finally he screamed. He screamed for a very long while.

When it was done, he lay limp and motionless on the couch, his eyes like balls of frozen glass. When he could, he raised his arm and looked at his wristwatch. It was almost two.

He struggled to his feet. His bones felt sheathed with lead but he managed to stumble to his desk and sit before it.

There he wrote on a sheet of paper and, when he was finished, slumped across the desk and fell into exhausted sleep.

Later, he woke up and took the sheet of paper to his superior, who, looking it over, nodded.

"Four hundred eighty-six, huh?" the superior said. "You're sure of that?"

"I'm sure," said David, quietly. "I watched every one." He didn't mention that Coulter and his family were among them.

"All right," said his superior. "Let's see now. Four hundred fifty-two from traffic accidents, eighteen from drowning, seven from sun-stroke, three from fireworks, six from miscellaneous causes."

Such as a little girl being burned to death, David thought. Such as a baby boy eating ant poison. Such as a woman being electrocuted; a man dying of snake bite.

"Well," his superior said, "let's make it-oh, four hundred and fifty. It's always impressive when more people die than we predict."

"Of course," David said.

The item was on the front page of all the newspapers that afternoon. While David was riding home the man in front of him turned to his neighbour and said, "What I'd like to know is *how can they tell?*"

David got up and went back on the platform on the end of the car. Until he got off, he stood there listening to the train wheels and thinking about Labor Day.

15 - OLD HAUNTS

Originally he'd intended to spend the one night in town at the Hotel Tiger. But it had occurred to him that maybe his old room was available. It was summer session now and there might not be a student living there. It was certainly worth a try. He could think of nothing more pleasant than sleeping in his old room, in his old bed.

The house was the same. He moved up the cement steps, smiling at their still

crumbled edges. Same old steps, he thought, still on the bum. As was the sagging screen door to the porch and the doorbell that had to be pushed in at an angle before connection was made. He shook his head, smiling, and wondered if Miss Smith were still alive.

It wasn't Miss Smith who answered the bell. His heart sank as, instead of her tottering old form, a husky middle-aged woman came bustling to the door.

"Yes?" she said, her voice a harsh, inhospitable sound.

"Is Miss Smith still here?" he asked, hoping, in spite of everything, that she was.

"No, Miss Ada's been dead for years."

It was like a slap on his face. He felt momentarily stunned as he nodded at the woman.

"I see," he said then. "I see. I used to room here while I was in college, you see, and I thought..."

Miss Smith dead.

"You going to school?" the woman asked.

He didn't know whether to take it as insult or praise.

"No, no," he said, "I'm just passing through on my way to Chicago. I graduated many years ago. I wondered if... anyone was living in the old room."

"The hall room, you mean?" the woman asked, regarding him clinically.

"That's right."

"Not till fall," she said.

"Could I...look at it?"

"Well, I..."

"I thought I might stay overnight," he said, hastily, "that is, if-"

"Oh, *that's* all right." The woman warmed her tone. "If that's what you want."

"I would," he said. "Sort of renew old acquaintanceship, you know."

He smiled self-consciously, wishing he hadn't said that.

"What would you want to pay?" asked the woman, more concerned with money than with memories.

"Well, I tell you," he said, impulsively, "I used to pay twenty dollars a month. Suppose I pay you that?"

"For one night?"

He felt foolish. But he couldn't back down now even though he felt that his offer had been a nostalgic blunder. No room was worth twenty dollars a night.

He caught himself. Why quibble? It was worth that much to relive old memories. Twenty dollars was nothing to him anymore. The past was.

"Glad to pay it," he said. "Well worth it to me."

He slid the bills from his wallet with awkward fingers and held them out to her.

He glanced at the bathroom as they walked down the dim lit hall. The familiar sight made him smile. There was something wonderful about returning. He couldn't help it; there just was.

"Yes, Miss Ada's been dead nigh onto five years," the woman said.

His smile faded.

When the woman opened the door to the room he wanted to stand there for a long moment looking at it before letting himself enter once more. But she stood waiting for him and he knew he'd feel ridiculous asking her to wait so he took a deep breath and went in.

Time travel. The phrase crossed his mind as he entered the room. Because it seemed as if he was suddenly back; the new student stepping into the room for the first time, suitcase in hand, at the beginning of a new adventure.

He stood there mutely, looking around the room, a sense of inexplicable fright taking hold of him. The room seemed to bring back everything. *Everything.* Mary and Norman and Spencer and David and classes and concerts and parties and dances and football games and beer-busts and all-night talks and everything. Memories crowded on him until it seemed that they would crush him.

"It's a little dusty but I'll clean it up when you go out to eat," the woman said. "I'll go get you some sheets."

He didn't hear her words or her footsteps moving down the hallway. He stood there possessed by the past.

He didn't know what it was that made him shudder and look around suddenly. It wasn't a sound or anything he saw. It was a feeling in his body and mind; a sense of unreasonable foreboding.

He jumped with a gasp as the door slammed violently shut. "It's the wind does it," said the woman returning with sheets for his old bed.

Broadway The traffic light turned red and he eased down the brake. His gaze moved across the store fronts.

There was the Crown Drug Store, still the same. Next to it, Flora Dame's Shoe Store. His eyes moved across the street. The Glendale Shop was still there. Barth's Clothes was still in its old location too.

Something in his mind seemed to loosen and he realized that he had been afraid of seeing the town changed. For when he'd turned the corner onto Broadway and seen that Mrs. Sloane's Book Shoppe and The College Grille were gone he'd felt almost a sense of betrayal. The town he remembered existed intact in his mind and it gave him a tense, restless feeling to see it partially changed. It was like

meeting an old friend and discovering, with a shock, that one of his legs was gone.

But enough things were the same to bring the solemn smile back to his lips.

The College Theatre where he and his friends had gone to midnight shows on Saturday nights after a date or long hours of study. The Collegiate Bowling Alleys; upstairs from them, the pool room.

And downstairs...

Impulsively, he pulled the car to the curb and switched off the motor. He sat there looking, for a moment, at the entrance to the Golden Campus. Then he slid quickly from the car.

The same old awning hung over the doorway, its once gaudy colours worn conservative by time and weather. He moved forward, a smile playing on his lips.

Then a sense of overpowering depression struck him as he stood looking down the steep, narrow staircase. He caught hold of the railing with his fingers and, after hesitating, let himself down slowly. He hadn't remembered the stairway being *this* narrow.

Near the bottom of the stairs, a whirring sound reached his ears. Someone was waxing the small dance floor with rotary brushes. He moved down the last step and saw the small black man following the gently bucking machine around the floor. He saw and heard the metal nose of the polisher bump into one of the columns that marked the boundaries of the dance floor.

Another frown crossed his face. The place was so small, so dingy. Surely memory hadn't erred that badly. No, he hastily explained to himself. No, it was because the place was empty and there were no lights. It was because the jukebox wasn't frothing with coloured bubbles and there were no couples dancing.

Unconsciously, he slid his hands into his trouser pockets, a pose he hadn't assumed more than once or twice since he'd left college eighteen years before. He moved closer to the dance floor, nodding once to the low, battered bandstand as one would to an old acquaintance.

He stood by the dance floor edge and thought of Mary.

How many times had they circled that tiny area, moving to the rhythms that pulsed from the glowing jukebox? Dancing slowly, their bodies intimately close, her warm hand idly stroking the back of his neck. How many times? Something tightened in his stomach. He could almost see her face again. He turned away quickly from the dance floor and looked at the dark wooden booths.

A forced smile raised his lips. Were they still there? He moved around the edge

of a column and started for the back.

"You lookin' for somebody?" the old black man asked.

"No, no," he said. "I just want to look at something."

He moved down the rows of booths, trying to ignore the feeling of awkwardness. Which one is it? he asked himself. He couldn't remember; they all looked the same. He stopped, hands on hips, and looked at all the booths, shaking his head slowly. On the dance floor, the black man finished his polishing, pulled the plug out and drew the lumbering machine away. The place grew deathly still.

He found them in the third booth he looked at. Worn thin, the letters almost as dark as the surrounding wood but, most assuredly, there. He slid into the booth and looked at them.

B.J. Bill Johnson. And, under the initials, the year 1939.

He thought about all the nights he and Spence and Dave and Norm had sat in this booth dissecting the universe with the deft, assured scalpels of college seniors.

"We thought we had it all," he murmured. "Every darn bit of it."

Slowly, he took off his hat and set it down on the table. What he wished for now was a glass of the old beer: that thick, malty brew that filled your veins and pumped your heart, as Spence used to say.

He nodded his head in appreciation, toasting a quiet toast.

"To you," he whispered. "The unbeatable past."

As he said it, he looked up from the table and saw a young man standing far across the room at the shadowy foot of the stairway. Johnson looked at the young man, unable to see him sharply without his glasses on.

After a moment, the young man turned and went back up the stairs. Johnson smiled to himself. Come back at six, he thought. The place doesn't open till six.

That made him think again of all the nights he'd spent down here in the musty dimness, drinking beer, talking, dancing, spending his youth with the casual improvidence of a millionaire.

He sat silent in the semi-darkness, memories swirling about him like a restless tide, lapping at his mind, forcing him to keep his lips pressed together because he knew that all this was gone forever.

In the midst of it, the memory of her came again. Mary, he thought and he wondered what had ever become of Mary?

It started again as he walked under the archway that led to the campus. An uneasy feeling that past and present were blending, that he was tightrope-walking between the two of them, on the verge of falling into either one.

The feeling dogged his steps, chilling the sense of elation he felt at being back.

He'd look at a building, thinking of the classes he'd taken there, the people he'd known there. Then, almost in the same moment, he'd see his present life, the dull empty rounds of selling. The months and years of solitary driving around the country. Ending only in return to a home he disliked, a wife he did not love.

He kept thinking about Mary. What a fool he'd been to let her go. To think, with the thoughtless assurance of youth, that the world was replete with endless possibilities. He'd thought it a mistake to choose so early in life and embrace the present good. He'd been a great one for looking for greener pastures. He'd kept looking until all his pastures were brown with time.

That feeling again: a combination of sensations. A creeping dissatisfaction that gnawed at him and choked him-and a restless, pursued feeling. An inescapable urge to look over his shoulder and see who was following him. He couldn't dismiss it and it bothered and upset him.

Now he was walking along the east side of the campus, his suit coat thrown over his right arm, his woven hat cocked back on his balding head. He could feel small sweat drops trickling down his back as he walked.

He wondered if he should stop and sit on the campus awhile. There were several students sprawled out under the trees, laughing and chatting.

But he was leery of speaking to students anymore. Just before he'd come onto the campus, he'd stopped at the Campus Cafe for a glass of iced tea. He'd sat next to a student there and tried to start a conversation.

The young man had treated him with insufferable deference. He hadn't said anything about it, of course, but it had been highly offensive.

Something else had happened too. While he was moving for the cashier's booth, a young man had walked by outside. Johnson had thought he knew him and had raised his arm to catch the student's attention.

Then he'd realized it was impossible that he knew any of the current students and he'd guiltily lowered his arm. He had paid his check, feeling very depressed.

The depression still clung to him as he walked up the steps of the Liberal Arts Building.

He turned at the head of the steps and looked back over the campus. In spite of deflated sentiment, it gave him a lift to see the campus still the same. It, at least, was unchanged and there was some sense of continuity in the world.

He smiled and turned, then turned again. *Was there someone following him?* The feeling was certainly strong enough. His worried gaze moved over the campus without seeing anything unusual. With an irritated shrug, he walked into the building.

It was still the same too and it made him feel good to walk on the dark tile

floors again, beneath the ceiling murals, up the marble steps, through the soundproof, air-cooled halls.

He didn't notice the face of the student who walked by him even though their shoulders almost touched. He did seem to notice the student looking at him. But he wasn't sure and, when he looked over his shoulder, the student had turned a corner.

The afternoon passed slowly. He walked from building to building, entering each one religiously, looking at bulletin boards, glancing into classrooms and smiling carefully-timed smiles at everything.

But he was beginning to feel a desire to run away. He resented the fact that no one spoke to him. He thought of going to the alumni director and chatting with him but he decided against it. He didn't want to seem pretentious. He was just an ex-student quietly visiting the scenes of his college days. That was all. No point in making a show of it.

As he walked back to the room that evening after supper, he had the definite impression that someone was following him.

Yet, whenever he stopped with a suspicious frown and looked back, there was nothing. Only the sound of cars honking down on Broadway or the laughter of young men up in their rooms.

On the porch steps of the house he stopped and looked up the street, an uneasy chill running down his back. Probably perspired too much this afternoon, he thought. Now the cooling air was chilling him. After all, he wasn't as young as-

He shook his head, trying to rid his mind of the phrase. A man's as young as he feels, he told himself authoritatively and nodded once curtly to impress the fact on his mind.

The woman had left the front door unlocked. As he entered, he heard her talking on the telephone in Miss Smith's bedroom. Johnson nodded to himself. How many times had he spoken to Mary on that old phone? What was the number again? 4458.

That was it. He smiled proudly at being able to remember it.

How many times had he sat there in the old black rocker exchanging light conversation with her? His face fell. Where was she now? Was she married and did she have children? Did she-

He stopped, tensing, as a floor board creaked behind him. He waited a moment, expecting to hear the woman's voice. Then he looked back quickly.

The hallway was empty.

With a swallow, he entered his room and shut the door firmly. He fumbled for

the light switch and finally found it.

He smiled again. This was more like it. He walked around his old room, running his hand over the top of the bureau, the student's desk, the mattress on the bed. He tossed down his hat and coat on the desk and settled down on the bed with a weary sigh. A grin lit his face as the old springs groaned. Same old springs, he thought.

He threw up his legs and fell back on the pillow. God, but it felt good. He ran his fingers over the bedspread, stroking it affectionately.

The house was very still. Johnson turned on his stomach and glanced out the window. There was the old alley, the big oak tree still towering over the house. He shook his head at the chest-filling sensation that thoughts of the past caused in him.

Then he started as the door thudded slightly in its frame. He looked quickly over his shoulder. *It's the wind does it*, the woman's words came to him.

He was certainly overwrought, he decided, but all these things were disturbing. Well, that was understandable. The day had been an emotional experience. To relive the past and regret the present was a full day's work for any man.

He was drowsy after the heavy meal he'd eaten at the Black and Gold Inn. He pushed himself up and shuffled over to the light switch.

The room plunged into darkness and he felt his way cautiously back to the bed. He lay down with a satisfied grunt.

It was still a good old bed. How many nights had he slept there, his brain seething with the contents of books he'd been studying? He reached down and loosened his belt, pretending he didn't feel a twinge of remorse at the way his once slender body had thickened. He sighed as the pressure on his stomach was eased. Then he rolled on his side in the warm, airless room and closed his eyes.

He lay there for a few minutes listening to the sound of a car passing in the street. Then he rolled onto his back with a groan. He stretched out his legs, let them go slack. Then he sat up and, reaching down, untied his shoes and dropped them on the floor. He fell back on the pillow and turned on his side again with a sigh.

It came slowly.

At first he thought it was his stomach bothering him. Then he realized it wasn't just his stomach muscles but every muscle in his body. He felt bands of ligament drawing in and a shudder ran through his frame.

He opened his eyes and blinked in the darkness. What in God's name was wrong? He stared at the desk and saw the dark outline of his hat and coat. Again, he closed his eyes. He had to relax. There were some big customers coming up in Chicago.

It's *cold*, he thought irritably, fumbling around at his side and finally drawing the bedspread over his stout body. He felt his skin crawling. He found himself listening but there was no other sound than the harshness of his own breathing. He twisted uncomfortably, wondering how the room could have gotten so cold all of a sudden. He must have gotten a chill.

He rolled onto his back and opened his eyes.

In an instant, his body stiffened and all sound was paralyzed in his throat.

There, leaning over him, bare inches from him, was the whitest, the most hating face he had ever seen in his entire life.

He lay there, staring up in numb, open-mouthed horror at the face.

"*Get out,*" said the face, its grating voice hoarse with malevolence. "*Get out. You can't come back.*"

For a long time after the face had disappeared, Johnson lay there, barely able to breathe, his hands in rigid knots at his sides, his eyes wide and staring. He kept trying to think but the memory of the face and the words spoken petrified his mind.

He didn't stay. When strength had returned, he got up, and managed to sneak out without attracting the attention of the woman. He drove quickly from the town, his face pale, thinking only of what he'd seen.

Himself.

The face of himself when he was in college. His young self hating this coarsened interloper for intruding on what could never be his again. And the young man in the Golden Campus; that had been his younger self. The student passing the Campus Cafe had been himself as he once was. And the student in the hallway and the resentful presence that had followed him around the campus, hating him for coming back and pawing at the past-they had all been him.

He never went back and he never told anyone what had happened. And when, in rare moments, he spoke of his college days, it was always with a shrug and a cynical smile to show how little it had really meant to him.

16 - THE DISTRIBUTOR

July 20

Time to move.

He'd found a small, furnished house on Sylmar Street. The Saturday morning he moved in, he went around the neighbourhood introducing himself.

"Good morning," he said to the old man pruning ivy next door. "My name is Theodore Gordon. I just moved in."

The old man straightened up and shook Theodore's hand. "How do," he said. His name was Joseph Alston.

A dog came shuffling from the porch to sniff Theodore's cuffs. "He's making up his mind about you," said the old man.

"Isn't that cute?" said Theodore.

Across the street lived Inez Ferrel. She answered the door in a housecoat, a thin woman in her late thirties. Theodore apologized for disturbing her.

"Oh, that's all right," she said. She had lots of time to herself when her husband was selling on the road.

"I hope we'll be good neighbors," said Theodore.

"I'm sure we will," said Inez Ferrel. She watched him through the window as he left.

Next door, directly across from his own house, he knocked quietly because there was a *Nightworker Sleeping* sign. Dorothy Backus opened the door-a tiny, withdrawn woman in her middle thirties.

"I'm so glad to meet you," said Theodore.

Next door lived the Walter Mortons. As Theodore came up the walk, he heard Bianca Morton talking loudly to her son, Walter, Jr.

"You are not old enough to stay out till three o'clock in the morning!" she was saying. "Especially with a girl as young as Katherine McCann!"

Theodore knocked and Mr. Morton, fifty-two and bald, opened the door.

"I just moved in across the street," said Theodore, smiling at them.

Patty Jefferson let him in next door. As he talked to her Theodore could see, through the back window, her husband Arthur filling a rubber pool for their son and daughter.

"They just love that pool," said Patty, smiling.

"I bet they do," said Theodore. As he left, he noticed the vacant house next door.

Across the street from the Jeffersons lived the McCanns and their fourteen-year-old daughter Katherine. As Theodore approached the door he heard the voice of James McCann saying, "Aah, he's nuts. Why should I take his lawn edger? Just because I borrowed his lousy mower a couple of times."

"Darling, *please*" said Faye McCann. "I've got to finish these notes in time for the Council's next meeting."

"Just because Kathy goes out with his lousy son..." grumbled her husband.

Theodore knocked on the door and introduced himself. He chatted briefly with

them, informing Mrs. McCann that he certainly would like to join the National Council for Christians and Jews. It was a worthy organization.

"What's your business, Gordon?" asked McCann.

"I'm in distribution," said Theodore.

Next door, two boys mowed and raked while their dog gambolled around them.

"Hello there," said Theodore. They grunted and watched him as he headed for the porch. The dog ignored him.

"I just *told* him." Henry Putnam's voice came through the living room window: "Put a coon in my department and I'm through. That's all."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Irma Putnam.

Theodore's knock was answered by the undershirted Mr. Putnam. His wife was lying on the sofa. Her heart, explained Mr. Putnam. "Oh, I'm sorry," Theodore said.

In the last house lived the Gorses.

"I just moved in next door," said Theodore. He shook Eleanor Gorse's lean hand and she told him that her father was at work.

"Is that him?" asked Theodore, pointing at the portrait of a stony-faced old man that hung above a mantel crowded with religious objects.

"Yes," said Eleanor, thirty-four and ugly.

"Well, I hope we'll be good neighbours," Theodore said.

That afternoon, he went to his new office and set up the darkroom.

July 23

That morning, before he left for the office, he checked the telephone directory and jotted down four numbers. He dialled the first.

"Would you please send a cab to 12057 Sylmar Street?" he said. "Thank you."

He dialled the second number. "Would you please send a repairman to my house," he said. "I don't get any picture. I live at 12070 Sylmar Street."

He dialled the third number: "I'd like to run this ad in Sunday's edition," he said. "1957 Ford. Perfect Condition. Seven-hundred eighty-nine dollars. That's right, seven-hundred eighty-nine. The number is DA-4-7408."

He made the fourth call and set up an afternoon appointment with Mr. Jeremiah Osborne. Then he stood by the living room window until the taxicab stopped in front of the Backus house.

As he was driving off, a television repair truck passed him. He looked back and saw it stop in front of Henry Putnam's house.

Dear sirs, he typed in the office later, *Please send me ten booklets for which I enclose one hundred dollars in payment.* He put down the name and address.

The envelope dropped into the out box.

July 27

When Inez Ferrel left her house that evening, Theodore followed in his car. Downtown, Mrs. Ferrel got off the bus and went into a bar called the Irish Lantern. Parking, Theodore entered the bar cautiously and slipped into a shadowy booth.

Inez Ferrel was at the back of the room perched on a bar stool. She'd taken off her jacket to reveal a clinging yellow sweater. Theodore ran his gaze across the studied exposition of her bust.

At length, a man accosted her and spoke and laughed and spent a modicum of time with her. Theodore watched them exit, arm in arm. Paying for his coffee, he followed. It was a short walk; Mrs. Ferrel and the man entered a hotel on the next block.

Theodore drove home, whistling.

The next morning, when Eleanor Gorse and her father had left with Mrs. Backus, Theodore followed.

He met them in the church lobby when the service was over. Wasn't it a wonderful coincidence, he said, that he, too, was a Baptist? And he shook the indurate hand of Donald Gorse.

As they walked into the sunshine, Theodore asked them if they wouldn't share his Sunday dinner with him. Mrs. Backus smiled faintly and murmured something about her husband. Donald Gorse looked doubtful.

"Oh, please," begged Theodore. "Make a lonely widower happy."

"Widower," tasted Mr. Gorse.

Theodore hung his head. "These many years," he said. "Pneumonia."

"Been a Baptist long?" asked Mr. Gorse.

"Since birth," said Theodore with fervour. "It's been my only solace."

For dinner he served lamb chops, peas, and baked potatoes. For dessert, apple cobbler and coffee.

"I'm so pleased you'd share my humble food," he said.

"This is, truly, loving thy neighbour as thyself." He smiled at Eleanor who returned it stiffly.

That evening, as darkness fell, Theodore took a stroll. As he passed the McCann house, he heard the telephone ringing, then James McCann shouting, "It's a *mistake*, damn it! Why in the lousy hell should I sell a '57 Ford for seven-

hundred eighty-nine bucks!"

The phone slammed down. "God *damn*!" howled James McCann.

"Darling, please be *tolerant*!" begged his wife.

The telephone rang again.

Theodore moved on.

August 1

At exactly two-fifteen a.m. Theodore slipped outside, pulled up one of Joseph Alston's longest ivy plants and left it on the sidewalk.

In the morning, as he left the house, he saw Walter Morton, Jr., heading for the McCann house with a blanket, a towel and a portable radio. The old man was picking up his ivy.

"Was it pulled up?" asked Theodore.

Joseph Alston grunted.

"So *that* was it," said Theodore.

"*What*?" the old man looked up.

"Last night," said Theodore, "I heard some noise out here. I looked out and saw a couple of boys."

"You seen their faces?" asked Alston, his face hardening.

"No, it was too dark," said Theodore. "But I'd say they were-oh, about the age of the Putnam boys. Not that it was them, of course."

Joe Alston nodded slowly, looking up the street.

Theodore drove up to the boulevard and parked. Twenty minutes later, Walter Morton, Jr., and Katherine McCann boarded a bus.

At the beach, Theodore sat a few yards behind them.

"That Mack is a character," he heard Walter Morton say. "He gets the urge, he drives to Tijuana, just for kicks."

In a while Morton and the girl ran into the ocean, laughing. Theodore stood and walked to a telephone booth.

"I'd like to have a swimming pool installed in my backyard next week," he said. He gave the details.

Back on the beach he sat patiently until Walter Morton and the girl were lying in each other's arms. Then, at specific moments, he pressed a shutter hidden in his palm. This done, he returned to his car, buttoning his shirt front over the tiny lens. On his way to the office, he stopped at a hardware store to buy a brush and a can of black paint.

He spent the afternoon printing the pictures. He made them appear as if they

had been taken at night and as if the young couple had been engaged in something else.

The envelope dropped softly into the out box.

August 5

The street was silent and deserted. Tennis shoes soundless on the paving, Theodore moved across the street.

He found the Morton's lawn mower in the backyard. Lifting it quietly, he carried it back across the street to the McCann garage. After carefully raising the door, he slid the mower behind the work bench. The envelope of photographs he put in a drawer behind a box of nails.

Returning to his house then, he phoned James McCann and, muffledly, asked if the Ford was still for sale.

In the morning, the mailman placed a bulky envelope on the Gorses' porch. Eleanor Gorse emerged and opened it, sliding out one of the booklets. Theodore watched the furtive look she cast about, the rising of dark colour in her cheeks.

As he was mowing the lawn that evening he saw Walter Morton, Sr., march across the street to where James McCann was trimming bushes. He heard them talking loudly. Finally, they went into McCann's garage from which Morton emerged pushing his lawn mower and making no reply to McCann's angry protests.

Across the street from McCann, Arthur Jefferson was just getting home from work. The two Putnam boys were riding their bicycles, their dog racing around them.

Now, across from where Theodore stood, a door slammed. He turned his head and watched Mr. Backus, in work clothes, storming to his car, muttering disgustedly, "*A swimming pool!*" Theodore looked to the next house and saw Inez Ferrel moving in her living room.

He smiled and mowed along the side of his house, glancing into Eleanor Gorse's bedroom. She was sitting with her back to him, reading something. When she heard the clatter of his mower she stood and left the bedroom, pushing the bulky envelope into a bureau drawer.

August 15

Henry Putnam answered the door.

"Good evening," said Theodore. "I hope I'm not intruding."

"Just chatting in the den with Irma's folks," said Putnam. "They're drivin' to

New York in the mornin'."

"Oh? Well, I'll only be a moment." Theodore held out a pair of BB guns. "A plant I distribute for was getting rid of these," he said. "I thought your boys might like them."

"Well, *sure*," said Putnam. He started for the den to get his sons.

While the older man was gone, Theodore picked up a couple of matchbooks whose covers read *Putnam's Wines and Liquors*. He'd slipped them into his pocket before the boys were led in to thank him.

"Mighty nice of you, Gordon," said Putnam at the door. "Sure appreciate it."

"My pleasure," said Theodore.

Walking home, he set the clock-radio for three-fifteen and lay down. When the music began, he moved outside on silent feet and tore up forty-seven ivy plants, strewing them over Alston's sidewalk.

"Oh, No," he said to Alston in the morning. He shook his head, appalled.

Joseph Alston didn't speak. He glanced down the block with hating eyes.

"Here, let me help you," Theodore said. The old man shook his head but Theodore insisted. Driving to the nearest nursery he brought back two sacks of peat moss; then squatted by Alston's side to help him replant.

"You hear anything last night?" the old man asked.

"You think it was those boys again?" asked Theodore, open-mouthed.

"Ain't say in'," Alston said.

Later, Theodore drove downtown and bought a dozen postcard photographs. He took them to the office.

Dear Walt, he printed crudely on the back of one, *Got these here in Tijuana. Hot enough for you?* In addressing the envelope, he failed to add *Jr.* to *Mr. Walter Morton*.

Into the out box.

August 23

"Mrs. Ferrel!"

She shuddered on the bar stool. "Why, Mister-"

"Gordon," he provided, smiling. "How nice to see you again."

"Yes." She pressed together lips that trembled.

"You come here often?" Theodore asked.

"Oh, no, *never*" Inez Ferrel blurted. "I'm-just supposed to meet a friend here tonight. A *girl* friend."

"Oh, I see," said Theodore. "Well, may a lonely widower keep you company

until she comes?"

"Why..." Mrs. Ferrel shrugged. "I guess." Her lips were painted brightly red against the alabaster of her skin. The sweater clung adhesively to the hoisted jut of her breasts.

After a while, when Mrs. Ferrel's friend didn't show up, they slid into a darkened booth. There, Theodore used Mrs. Ferrel's powder room retreat to slip a pale and tasteless powder in her drink. On her return she swallowed this and, in minutes, grew stupefied. She smiled at Theodore.

"I like you Misser Gor'n," she confessed. The words crawled viscidly across her lolling tongue.

Shortly thereafter, he led her, stumbling and giggling, to his car and drove her to a motel. Inside the room, he helped her strip to stockings, garter belt and shoes and, while she posed with drugged complacency, Theodore took flashbulb pictures.

After she'd collapsed at two a.m. Theodore dressed her and drove her home. He stretched her fully dressed across her bed. After that he went outside and poured concentrated weed killer on Alston's replanted ivy.

Back in the house he dialled the Jefferson's number.

"Yes," said Arthur Jefferson irritably.

"Get out of this neighbourhood or you'll be sorry," whispered Theodore, then hung up.

In the morning he walked to Mrs. Ferrel's house and rang the bell.

"Hello," he said politely. "Are you feeling better?"

She stared at him blankly while he explained how she'd gotten violently ill the night before and he'd taken her home from the bar. "I do hope you're feeling better," he concluded.

"Yes," she said, confusedly, "I'm-all right."

As he left her house he saw a red-faced James McCann approaching the Morton house, an envelope in his hand. Beside him walked a distraught Mrs. McCann.

"We must be *tolerant*, Jim," Theodore heard her say.

August 31

At two-fifteen a.m. Theodore took the brush and the can of paint and went outside.

Walking to the Jefferson house he set the can down and painted, jaggedly, across the door-nigger!

Then he moved across the street allowing an occasional drip of paint. He left the can under Henry Putnam's back porch, accidentally upsetting the dog's plate. Fortunately, the Putnams' dog slept indoors.

Later, he put more weed killer on Joseph Alston's ivy.

In the morning, when Donald Gorse had gone to work, he took a heavy envelope and went to see Eleanor Gorse. "Look at this," he said, sliding a pornographic booklet from the envelope. "I received this in the mail today. *Look* at it." He thrust it into her hands.

She held the booklet as if it were a spider.

"Isn't it hideous?" he said.

She made a face. "*Revolting*," she said.

"I thought I'd check with you and several others before I phoned the police," said Theodore. "Have you received any of this filth?"

Eleanor Gorse bristled. "Why should I receive them?" she demanded.

Outside, Theodore found the old man squatting by his ivy. "How are they coming?" he asked.

"They're dyin'."

Theodore looked stricken. "How can this be?" he asked.

Alston shook his head.

"Oh, this is *horrible*." Theodore turned away, clucking. As he walked to his house he saw, up the street, Arthur Jefferson cleaning off his door and, across the way, Henry Putnam watching carefully.

She was waiting on his porch.

"Mrs. McCann," said Theodore, surprised, "I'm so glad to see you."

"What I came to say may not make you so glad," she said unhappily.

"Oh?" said Theodore. They went into his house.

"There have been a lot of... *things* happening in this neighbourhood since you moved in," said Mrs. McCann after they were seated in the living room.

"Things?" asked Theodore.

"I think you know what I mean," said Mrs. McCann. "However, this-this *bigotry* on Mr. Jefferson's door is too much, Mr. Gordon, too much."

Theodore gestured helplessly. "I don't understand."

"Please don't make it difficult," she said. "I may have to call the authorities if these things don't stop, Mr. Gordon. I hate to think of doing such a thing but-"

"*Authorities?*" Theodore looked terrified.

"None of these things happened until you moved in, Mr. Gordon," she said. "Believe me, I hate what I'm saying but I simply have no choice. The fact that none of these things has happened to you-"

She broke off startledly as a sob wracked Theodore's chest. She stared at him. "Mr. Gordon-" she began uncertainly.

"I don't know what these things are you speak of," said Theodore in a shaking voice, "but I'd *kill* myself before I harmed another, Mrs. McCann."

He looked around as if to make sure they were alone.

"I'm going to tell you something I've never told a single soul," he said. He wiped away a tear. "My name isn't Gordon," he said. "It's Gottlieb. I'm a Jew. I spent a year at Dachau."

Mrs. McCann's lips moved but she said nothing. Her face was getting red.

"I came from there a broken man," said Theodore. "I haven't long to live, Mrs. McCann. My wife is dead, my three children are dead. I'm all alone. I only want to live in peace-in a little place like this-among people like you.

"To be a neighbour, a friend..."

"Mr.-*Gottlieb*" she said brokenly.

After she was gone, Theodore stood silent in the living room, hands clenched whitely at his sides. Then he went into the kitchen to discipline himself.

"Good morning, Mrs. Backus," he said an hour later when the little woman answered the door, "I wonder if I might ask you some questions about our church?"

"Oh. Oh, yes." She stepped back feebly. "Won't you-come in?"

"I'll be very still so as not to wake your husband," Theodore whispered. He saw her looking at his bandaged hand. "I burned myself," he said. "Now, about the church. Oh, there's someone knocking at your back door."

"There is?"

When she'd gone into the kitchen, Theodore pulled open the hall closet door and dropped some photographs behind a pile of overshoes and garden tools. The door was shut when she returned.

"There wasn't anyone," she said.

"I could have sworn..." He smiled deprecatingly. He looked down at a circular bag on the floor. "Oh, does Mr. Backus bowl?"

"Wednesdays and Fridays when his shift is over," she said. "There's an all-night alley over on Western Avenue."

"I love to bowl," said Theodore.

He asked his questions about the church, then left. As he started down the path he heard loud voices from the Morton house.

"It wasn't bad enough about Katherine McCann and *those* awful pictures," shrieked Mrs. Morton. "Now this... *filth!*"

"But, Mom!" cried Walter, Jr.

September 14

Theodore awoke and turned the radio off. Standing, he put a small bottle of greyish powder in his pocket and slipped from the house. Reaching his destination, he sprinkled powder into the water bowl and stirred it with a finger until it dissolved.

Back in the house he scrawled four letters reading: *Arthur Jefferson is trying to pass the colour line. He is my cousin and should admit he is black like the rest of us. I am doing this for his own good.*

He signed the letter *John Thomas Jefferson* and addressed three of the envelopes to Donald Gorse, the Mortons, and Mr. Henry Putnam.

This completed, he saw Mrs. Backus walking toward the boulevard and followed. "May I walk you?" he asked.

"Oh," she said. "All right."

"I missed your husband last night," he told her.

She glanced at him.

"I thought I'd join him bowling," Theodore said, "but I guess he was sick again."

"Sick?"

"I asked the man behind the counter at the alley and he said that Mr. Backus hadn't been coming in because he was sick."

"Oh," Mrs. Backus's voice was thinly stricken.

"Well, maybe next Friday," said Theodore.

Later, when he came back, he saw a panel truck in front of Henry Putnam's house. A man came out of the alley carrying a blanket-wrapped body which he laid in the truck. The Putnam boys were crying as they watched.

Arthur Jefferson answered the door. Theodore showed the letter to Jefferson and his wife. "It came this morning," he said.

"This is *monstrous!*" said Jefferson, reading it.

"Of *course* it is," said Theodore.

While they were talking, Jefferson looked through the window at the Putnam house across the street.

September 15

Pale morning mist engulfed Sylmar Street. Theodore moved through it silently. Under the back porch of the Jeffersons' house he set fire to a box of damp

papers. As it began to smoulder he walked across the yard and, with a single knife stroke, slashed apart the rubber pool. He heard it pulsing water on the grass as he left. In the alley he dropped a book of matches that read *Putnam's Wines and Liquors*.

A little after six that morning he woke to the howl of sirens and felt the small house tremble at the heavy trucks passing by. Turning on his side, he yawned, and mumbled, "Goody."

September 17

It was a paste-complexioned Dorothy Backus who answered Theodore's knock. "May I drive you to church?" asked Theodore.

"I-I don't believe I-I'm not... feeling too well," stumbled Mrs. Backus.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Theodore said. He saw the edges of some photographs protruding from her apron pocket.

As he left he saw the Mortons getting in their car, Bianca wordless, both Walters ill at ease. Up the street, a police car was parked in front of Arthur Jefferson's house.

Theodore went to church with Donald Gorse who said that Eleanor was feeling ill.

"I'm so sorry," Theodore said.

That afternoon, he spent a while at the Jefferson house helping clear away the charred debris of their back porch. When he saw the slashed rubber pool he drove immediately to a drug store and bought another one.

"But they love that pool," said Theodore, when Patty Jefferson protested. "You told me so yourself."

He winked at Arthur Jefferson but Jefferson was not communicative that afternoon.

September 23

Early in the evening Theodore saw Alston's dog walking in the street. He got his BB gun and, from the bedroom window, soundlessly, fired. The dog nipped fiercely at its side and spun around. Then, whimpering, it started home.

Several minutes later, Theodore went outside and started pulling up the door to the garage. He saw the old man hurrying down his alley, the dog in his arms.

"What's wrong?" asked Theodore.

"Don't know," said Alston in a breathless, frightened voice. "He's hurt."

"Quickly!" said Theodore. "Into my car!"

He rushed Alston and the dog to the nearest veterinary, passing three stop signs and groaning when the old man held his hand up, palsiedly, and whimpered, "*Blood!*"

For three hours Theodore sat in the veterinary's waiting room until the old man staggered forth, his face a greyish white.

"No," said Theodore, jumping to his feet.

He led the old man, weeping, to the car and drove him home. There, Alston said he'd rather be alone so Theodore left. Shortly afterward, the black and white police car rolled to a stop in front of Alston's house and the old man led the two officers past Theodore's house.

In a while, Theodore heard angry shouting up the street. It lasted quite a long time.

September 27

"Good evening," said Theodore. He bowed.

Eleanor Gorse nodded stiffly.

"I've brought you and your father a casserole," said Theodore, smiling, holding up a towel-wrapped dish. When she told him that her father was gone for the night, Theodore clucked and sighed as if he hadn't seen the old man drive away that afternoon.

"Well then," he said, proffering the dish, "for *you*. With my sincerest compliments."

Stepping off the porch he saw Arthur Jefferson and Henry Putnam standing under a street lamp down the block. While he watched, Arthur Jefferson struck the other man and, suddenly, they were brawling in the gutter. Theodore broke into a hurried run.

"But this is *terrible!*" he gasped, pulling the men apart.

"Stay out of this!" warned Jefferson, then, to Putnam, challenged, "You better tell me how that paint can got under your porch! The police may believe it was an accident I found that matchbook in my alley but I don't!"

"I'll tell you nothing," Putnam said, contemptuously. "*Coon.*"

"Coon! Oh, of course! You'd be the first to believe that, you stupid-!"

Five times Theodore stood between them. It wasn't until Jefferson had, accidentally, struck him on the nose that tension faded. Curtly, Jefferson apologized; then, with a murderous look at Putnam, left.

"Sorry he hit you," Putnam sympathized. "Damned nigger."

"Oh, surely you're mistaken," Theodore said, daubing at his nostrils. "Mr. Jefferson told me how afraid he was of people believing this talk. Because of the value of his two houses, you know."

"Two?" asked Putnam.

"Yes, he owns the vacant house next door to his," said Theodore. "I assumed you knew."

"No," said Putnam warily.

"Well, you see," said Theodore, "if people think Mr. Jefferson is a Negro, the value of his houses will go down."

"So will the values of all of them," said Putnam, glaring across the street. "That dirty, son-of-a-"

Theodore patted his shoulder. "How are your wife's parents enjoying their stay in New York?" he asked as if changing the subject.

"They're on their way back," said Putnam.

"Good," said Theodore.

He went home and read the funny papers for an hour. Then he went out.

It was a florid faced Eleanor Gorse who opened to his knock. Her bathrobe was disarrayed, her dark eyes feverish.

"May I get my dish?" asked Theodore politely.

She grunted, stepping back jerkily. His hand, in passing, brushed on hers. She twitched away as if he'd stabbed her.

"Ah, you've eaten it all," said Theodore, noticing the tiny residue of powder on the bottom of the dish. He turned. "When will your father return?" he asked.

Her body seemed to tense. "After midnight," she muttered.

Theodore stepped to the wall switch and cut off the light. He heard her gasp in the darkness. "No," she muttered.

"Is this what you want, Eleanor?" he asked, grabbing harshly.

Her embrace was a mindless, fiery swallow. There was nothing but ovening flesh beneath her robe.

Later, when she lay snoring satedly on the kitchen floor, Theodore retrieved the camera he'd left outside the door.

Drawing down the shades, he arranged Eleanor's limbs and took twelve exposures. Then he went home and washed the dish.

Before retiring, he dialled the phone.

"Western Union," he said. "I have a message for Mrs. Irma Putnam of 12070 Sylmar Street."

"That's me," she said.

"Both parents killed in auto collision this afternoon," said Theodore. "Await

word regarding disposition of bodies. Chief of Police, Tulsa, Okla-"

At the other end of the line there was a strangled gasp, a thud; then Henry Putnam's cry of "Irma!" Theodore hung up.

After the ambulance had come and gone, he went outside and tore up thirty-five of Joseph Alston's ivy plants. He left, in the debris, another matchbook reading *Putnam's Wines and Liquors*.

September 28

In the morning, when Donald Gorse had gone to work, Theodore went over. Eleanor tried to shut the door on him **but** he pushed in.

"I want money," he said. "These are my collateral." He threw down copies of the photographs and Eleanor recoiled, gagging. "Your father will receive a set of these tonight," he said, "unless I get two hundred dollars."

"But I-!"

"Tonight."

He left and drove downtown to the Jeremiah Osborne Realty office where he signed over, to Mr. George Jackson, the vacant house at 12069 Sylmar Street. He shook Mr. Jackson's hand.

"Don't you worry now," he comforted. "The people next door are black too."

When he returned home, there was a police car in front of the Backus house.

"What happened?" he asked Joseph Alston who was sitting quietly on his porch.

"Mrs. Backus," said the old man lifelessly. "She tried to kill Mrs. Ferrel."

"Is that right?" said Theodore.

That night, in his office, he made his entries on page 700 of the book.

Mrs. Ferrel dying of knife wounds in local hospital. Mrs. Backus in jail; suspects husband of adultery. J. Alston accused of dog poisoning, probably more. Putnam boys accused of shooting Alston's dog, ruining his lawn. Mrs. Putnam dead of heart attack. Mr. Putnam being sued for property destruction. Jeffersons thought to be black. McCanns and Mortons deadly enemies. Katherine McCann believed to have had relations with Walter Morton, Jr. Morton, Jr. being sent to school in Washington. Eleanor Gorse has hanged herself Job completed.

Time to move.

17 - CRICKETS

After supper, they walked down to the lake and looked at its moon-reflecting surface.

"Pretty, isn't it?" she said.

"Mmm-hmm."

"It's been a nice vacation."

"Yes, it has," he said.

Behind them, the screen door on the hotel porch opened and shut. Someone started down the gravel, path towards the lake. Jean glanced over her shoulder.

"Who is it?" asked Hal without turning.

"That man we saw in the dining room," she said.

In a few moments, the man stood nearby on the shoreline. He didn't speak or look at them. He stared across the lake at the distant woods.

"Should we talk to him?" whispered Jean.

"I don't know," he whispered back.

They looked at the lake again and Hal's arm slipped around her waist.

Suddenly the man asked:

"Do you hear them?"

"Sir?" said Hal.

The small man turned and looked at them. His eyes appeared to glitter in the moonlight.

"I asked if you heard them," he said.

There was a brief pause before Hal asked, "Who?"

"The crickets."

The two of them stood quietly. Then Jean cleared her throat. "Yes, they're nice," she said.

"Nice?" The man turned away. After a moment, he turned back and came walking over to them.

"My name is John Morgan," he said.

"Hal and Jean Galloway," Hal told him and then there was an awkward silence.

"It's a lovely night," Jean offered.

"It would be if it weren't for them," said Mr. Morgan. "The crickets."

"Why don't you like them?" asked Jean.

Mr. Morgan seemed to listen for a moment, his face rigid. His gaunt throat moved. Then he forced a smile.

"Allow me the pleasure of buying you a glass of wine," he said.

"Well-" Hal began.

"Please." There was a sudden urgency in Mr. Morgan's voice.

The dining hall was like a vast shadowy cavern. The only light came from the small lamp on their table which cast up formless shadows of them on the walls.

"Your health," said Mr. Morgan, raising his glass. The wine was dry and tart. It trickled in chilly drops down Jean's throat, making her shiver.

"So what about the crickets?" asked Hal.

Mr. Morgan put his glass down.

"I don't know whether I should tell you," he said. He looked at them carefully. Jean felt restive under his surveillance and reached out to take a sip from her glass.

Suddenly, with a movement so brusque that it made her hand twitch and spill some wine, Mr. Morgan drew a small, black notebook from his coat pocket. He put it on the table carefully.

"There," he said.

"What is it?" asked Hal.

"A code book," said Mr. Morgan.

They watched him pour more wine into his glass, then set down the bottle and the bottle's shadow on the table cloth. He picked up the glass and rolled its stem between his fingers.

"It's the code of the crickets," he said.

Jean shuddered. She didn't know why. There was nothing terrible about the words. It was the way Mr. Morgan had spoken them.

Mr. Morgan leaned forward, his eyes glowing in the lamplight.

"Listen," he said. "They aren't just making indiscriminate noises when they rub their wings together." He paused. "*They're sending messages*," he said.

Jean felt as if she were a block of wood. The room seemed to shift balance around her, everything leaning towards her.

"Why are you telling us?" asked Hal.

"Because now I'm sure," said Mr. Morgan. He leaned in close. "Have you ever really listened to the crickets?" he asked. "I mean really? If you had you'd have heard a rhythm to their noises. A pace-a definite beat.

"I've listened," he said. "For seven years I've listened. And the more I listened the more I became convinced that their noise was a code; that they were sending messages in the night.

"Then-about a week ago-I suddenly heard the pattern. It's like a Morse code only, of course, the sounds are different."

Mr. Morgan stopped talking and looked at his black notebook.

"And there it is," he said. "After seven years of work, here it is. I've deciphered it."

His throat worked convulsively as he picked up his glass and emptied it with a swallow.

"Well-what are they saying?" Hal asked, awkwardly.

Mr. Morgan looked at him.

"Names," he said. "Look, I'll show you."

He reached into one of his pockets and drew out a stubby pencil. Tearing a blank page from his notebook, he started to write on it, muttering to himself.

"Pulse, pulse-silence-pulse, pulse, pulse-silence-pulse-silence-"

Hal and Jean looked at each other. Hal tried to smile but couldn't. Then they were looking back at the small man bent over the table, listening to the crickets and writing.

Mr. Morgan put down the pencil. "It will give you some idea," he said, holding out the sheet to them. They looked at it.

MARIE CADMAN, it read. JOHN JOSEPH ALSTER. SAMUEL-

"You see," said Mr. Morgan. "Names."

"Whose?" Jean had to ask it even though she didn't want to.

Mr. Morgan held the book in a clenching hand.

"The names of the dead," he answered.

Later that night, Jean climbed into bed with Hal and pressed close to him. "I'm cold," she murmured.

"You're scared."

"Aren't you?"

"Well," he said, "if I am, it isn't in the way you think."

"How's that?"

"I don't believe what he said. But he might be a dangerous man. That's what I'm afraid of."

"Where'd he get those names?"

"Maybe they're friends of his," he said. "Maybe he got them from tombstones. He might have just made them up." He grunted softly. "But I don't think the crickets told him," he said.

Jean snuggled against him.

"I'm glad you told him we were tired," she said. "I don't think I could have

taken much more."

"Honey," he said, "here that nice little man was giving us the lowdown on crickets and you disparage him."

"Hal," she said, "I'll never be able to enjoy crickets for the rest of my life."

They lay close to each other and slept. And, outside in the still darkness, crickets rubbed their wings together until morning came.

Mr. Morgan came rapidly across the dining room and sat down at their table.

"I've been looking for you all day," he said. "You've got to help me."

Hal's mouth tightened. "Help you how?" he asked, putting down his fork.

"They know I'm on to them," said Mr. Morgan. "They're after me."

"Who, the crickets?" Hal asked, jadedly.

"I don't know," said Mr. Morgan. "Either them or-"

Jean held her knife and fork with rigid fingers. For some reason, she felt a chill creeping up her legs.

"Mr. Morgan." Hal was trying to sound patient.

"Understand me," Mr. Morgan pleaded. "The crickets are under the command of the dead. The dead send out these messages."

"Why?"

"They're compiling a list of all their names," said Mr. Morgan. "They keep sending the names through the crickets to let the others know."

"Why?" repeated Hal.

Mr. Morgan's hands trembled. "I don't know, I don't know," he said. "Maybe when there are enough names, when enough of them are ready, they'll-" His throat moved convulsively. "*They'll come back*," he said.

After a moment, Hal asked, "What makes you think you're in any danger?"

"Because while I was writing down more names last night," said Mr. Morgan, "*they spelled out my name*."

Hal broke the heavy silence.

"What can we do?" he asked in a voice that bordered on uneasiness.

"Stay with me," said Mr. Morgan, "so they can't get me."

Jean looked nervously at Hal.

"I won't bother you," said Mr. Morgan. "I won't even sit here, I'll sit across the room. Just so I can see you."

He stood up quickly and took out his notebook.

"Will you watch this?" he asked.

Before they could say another word, he left their table and walked across the dining room, weaving in and out among the white-clothed tables. About fifty feet from them, he sat down, facing them. They saw him reach forward and turn

on the table lamp.

"What do we do now?" asked Jean.

"We'll stay here a little while," said Hal. "Nurse the bottle along. When it's empty, we'll go to bed."

"Do we have to stay?"

"Honey, who knows what's going on in that mind of his? I don't want to take any chances."

Jean closed her eyes and exhaled wearily. "What a way to polish off a vacation," she said.

Hal reached over and picked up the notebook. As he did, he became conscious of the crickets rasping outside. He flipped through the pages. They were arranged in alphabetical order, on each page three letters with their pulse equivalents.

"He's watching us," said Jean.

"Forget him."

Jean leaned over and looked at the notebook with him. Her eyes moved over the arrangements of dots and dashes.

"You think there's anything to this?" she asked.

"Let's hope not," said Hal.

He tried to listen to the crickets' noise and find some point of comparison with the notes. He couldn't. After several minutes, he shut the book.

When the wine bottle was empty, Hal stood. "Beddy-bye," he said.

Before Jean was on her feet, Mr. Morgan was halfway to their table. "You're leaving?" he asked.

"Mr. Morgan, it's almost eleven," Hal said. "We're tired. I'm sorry but we have to go to bed."

The small man stood wordless, looking from one to the other with pleading, hopeless eyes. He seemed about to speak, then his narrow shoulders slumped and his gaze dropped to the floor. They heard him swallowing.

"You'll take care of the book?" he asked.

"Don't you want it?"

"No." Mr. Morgan turned away. After a few paces, he stopped and glanced back across his shoulder. "Could you leave your door open so I can-call?"

"All right, Mr. Morgan," he said.

A faint smile twitched Mr. Morgan's lips.

"Thank you," he said and walked away.

It was after four when the screaming woke them. Hal felt Jean's fingers clutching at his arm as they both jolted to a sitting position, staring into the darkness.

"What is it?" gasped Jean.

"I don't know." Hal threw off the covers and dropped his feet to the floor.

"Don't leave me!" said Jean.

"Come on then!"

The hall had a dim bulb burning overhead. Hal sprinted over the floorboards towards Mr. Morgan's room. The door to it was closed although it had been left open before. Hal banged his fist on it. "Mr. Morgan!" he called.

Inside the room, there was a sudden, rustling, crackling sound-like that of a million, wildly shaken tambourines. The noise made Hal's hand jerk back convulsively from the door knob.

"What's *that*?" Jean asked in a terrified whisper.

He didn't answer. They stood immobile, not knowing what to do. Then, inside, the noise stopped. Hal took a deep breath and pushed open the door.

The scream gagged in Jean's throat.

Lying in a pool of blood splotched moonlight was Mr. Morgan, his skin raked open as if by a thousand tiny razor blades. There was a gaping hole in the window screen.

Jean stood paralyzed, a fist pressed against her mouth while Hal moved to Mr. Morgan's side. He knelt down beside the motionless man and felt at Mr. Morgan's chest where the pyjama top had been sliced to ribbons. The faintest of heartbeats pulsed beneath his trembling fingers.

Mr. Morgan opened his eyes. Wide, staring eyes that recognized nothing, that looked right through Hal.

"P-H-I-L-I-P M-A-X-W-E-L-L." Mr. Morgan spelled out the name in a bubbling voice.

"M-A-R-Y G-A-B-R-I-E-L," spelled Mr. Morgan, eyes stark and glazed.

His chest lurched once. His eyes widened.

"J-O-H-N M-O-R-G-A-N," he spelled.

Then his eyes began focusing on Hal. There was a terrible rattling in his throat. As though the sounds were wrenched from him one by one by a power beyond his own, he spoke again.

"H-A-R-O-L-D G-A-L-L-O-W-A-Y," he spelled, "J-E-A-N G-A-L-L-O-W-A-Y"

Then they were alone with a dead man.

And outside in the night, a million crickets rubbed their wings together.

18 - FIRST ANNIVERSARY

Just before he left the house on Thursday morning, Adeline asked him, "Do I still taste sour to you?"

Norman looked at her reproachfully.

"Well, do I?"

He slipped his arms around her waist and nibbled at her throat.

"Tell me now," said Adeline.

Norman looked submissive.

"Aren't you going to let me live it down?" he asked.

"Well, you *said* it, darling. And on our first anniversary too!"

He pressed his cheek to hers. "So I said it," he murmured. "Can't I be allowed a faux pas now and then?"

"You haven't answered me."

"Do you taste sour? Of course you don't." He held her close and breathed the fragrance of her hair. "Forgiven?"

She kissed the tip of his nose and smiled and, once more, he could only marvel at the fortune which had bestowed on him such a magnificent wife. Starting their second year of marriage, they were still like honeymooners.

Norman raised her face and kissed her.

"Be damned," he said.

"What's wrong? Am I sour again?"

"No." He looked confused. "Now I can't taste you at all."

Now you can't taste her at all," said Dr. Phillips.

Norman smiled. "I know it sounds ridiculous," he said.

"Well, it's unique, I'll give it that," said Phillips.

"More than you think," added Norman, his smile grown a trifle laboured.

"How so?"

"I have no trouble tasting anything else."

Dr. Phillips peered at him awhile before he spoke. "Can you smell her?" he asked then.

"Yes."

"You're sure."

"Yes. What's that got to do with-" Norman stopped. "You mean that the senses of taste and smell go together," he said.

Phillips nodded. "If you can smell her, you should be able to taste her."

"I suppose," said Norman, "but I can't."

Dr. Phillips grunted wryly. "Quite a poser."

"No ideas?" asked Norman.

"Not offhand," said Phillips, "though I suspect it's allergy of some kind."

Norman looked disturbed.

"I hope I find out soon," he said.

Adeline looked up from her stirring as he came into the kitchen. "What did Dr. Phillips say?" "That I'm allergic to you." "He didn't say that," she scolded.

"Sure he did."

"Be serious now."

"He said I have to take some allergy tests."

"He doesn't think it's anything to worry about, does he?" asked Adeline.

"No."

"Oh, good." She looked relieved.

"Good, nothing," he grumbled. "The taste of you is one of the few pleasures I have in life."

"You stop that." She removed his hands and went on stirring. Norman slid his arm around her and rubbed his nose on the back of her neck. "Wish I could taste you," he said. "I like your flavour."

She reached up and caressed his cheek. "I love you," she said.

Norman twitched and made a startled noise.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He sniffed. "What's that?" He looked around the kitchen. "Is the garbage out?" he asked.

She answered quietly. "Yes, Norman."

"Well, something sure as hell smells awful in here. Maybe-" He broke off, seeing the expression on her face. She pressed her lips together and, suddenly, it dawned on him. "Honey, you don't think I'm saying-"

"Well, *aren't* you?" Her voice was faint and trembling.

"Adeline, come on."

"First, I taste sour. Now-"

He stopped her with a lingering kiss.

"I love you," he said, "understand? I *love* you. Do you think I'd try to hurt you?"

She shivered in his arms. "You *do* hurt me," she whispered.

He held her close and stroked her hair. He kissed her gently on the lips, the cheeks, the eyes. He told her again and again how much he loved her.

He tried to ignore the smell.

Instantly, his eyes were open and he was listening. He stared up sightlessly into the darkness. Why had he woken up? He turned his head and reached across the mattress. As he touched her, Adeline stirred a little in her sleep.

Norman twisted over on his side and wriggled close to her. He pressed against the yielding warmth of her body, his hand slipping languidly across her hip. He lay his cheek against her back and started drifting downward into sleep again.

Suddenly, his eyes flared open. Aghast, he put his nostrils to her skin and sniffed. An icy barb of dread hooked at his brain; *my God, what's wrong?* He sniffed again, harder. He lay against her, motionless, trying not to panic.

If his senses of taste and smell were atrophying, he could understand, accept. They weren't, though. Even as he lay there, he could taste the acrid flavour of the coffee that he'd drunk that night. He could smell the faint odour of mashed-out cigarettes in the ashtray on his bedside table. With the least effort, he could smell the wool of the blanket over them.

Then *why?* She was the most important thing in his life. It was torture to him that, in bits and pieces, she was fading from his senses.

It had been a favourite restaurant since their days of courtship.

They liked the food, the tranquil atmosphere, the small ensemble which played for dining and for dancing. Searching in his mind, Norman had chosen it as the place where they could best discuss this problem. Already, he was sorry that he had. There was no atmosphere that could relieve the tension he was feeling; and expressing.

"What *else* can it be?" he asked, unhappily. "It's nothing physical." He pushed aside his untouched supper. "It's got to be my mind."

"But why, Norman?"

"*If I only knew,*" he answered.

She put her hand on his. "Please don't worry," she said.

"How can I help it?" he asked. "It's a nightmare. I've *lost* part of you, Adeline."

"Darling, don't," she begged, "I can't bear to see you unhappy"

"I *am* unhappy," he said. He rubbed a finger on the tablecloth. "And I've just about made up my mind to see an analyst." He looked up. "It's got to be my mind," he repeated. "And-damnit!-I resent it. I want to root it out."

He forced a smile, seeing the fear in her eyes.

"Oh, the hell with it," he said. "I'll go to an analyst; he'll fix me up. Come on, let's dance."

She managed to return his smile.

"Lady, you're just plain gorgeous," he told her as they came together on the dance floor.

"*Oh, I love you so,*" she whispered.

It was in the middle of their dance that the feel of her began to change.

Norman held her tightly, his cheek forced close to hers so that she wouldn't see the sickened expression on his face.

And now it's gone?" finished Dr. Bernstrom. Norman expelled a burst of smoke and jabbed out his cigarette in the ashtray. "Correct," he said, angrily.

"When?"

"This morning," answered Norman. The skin grew taut across his cheeks. "No taste. No smell." He shuddered fitfully "And now no sense of touch."

His voice broke. "What's wrong?" he pleaded. "What kind of breakdown is this?"

"Not an incomprehensible one," said Bernstrom.

Norman looked at him anxiously. "What then?" he asked. "Remember what I said: it has to do only with my wife. Outside of her-"

"I understand," said Bernstrom.

"Then what is it?"

"You've heard of hysterical blindness."

"Yes."

"Hysterical deafness."

"Yes, but-"

"Is there any reason, then, there couldn't be an hysterical restraint of the other senses as well?"

"All right, but why?"

Dr. Bernstrom smiled.

"That, I presume," he said, "is why you came to see me."

Sooner or later, the notion had to come. No amount of love could stay it. It came now as he sat alone in the living room, staring at the blur of letters on a newspaper page.

Look at the facts. Last Wednesday night, he'd kissed her and, frowning, said, "You taste sour, honey." She'd tightened, drawn away. At the time, he'd taken her reaction at its obvious value: she felt insulted. Now, he tried to summon up a detailed memory of her behaviour afterward.

Because, on Thursday morning, he'd been unable to taste her at all.

Norman glanced guiltily toward the kitchen where Adeline was cleaning up. Except for the sound of her occasional footsteps, the house was silent.

Look at the facts, his mind persisted. He leaned back in the chair and started to review them.

Next, on Saturday, had come that dankly fetid stench. Granted, she should feel resentment if he'd accused her of being its source. But he hadn't; he was sure of

it. He'd looked around the kitchen, asked her if she'd put the garbage out. Yet, instantly, she'd assumed that he was talking about her.

And, that night, when he'd woken up, he couldn't smell her.

Norman closed his eyes. His mind must really be in trouble if he could justify such thoughts. He loved Adeline; needed her. How could he allow himself to believe that *she* was, in any way, responsible for what had happened?

Then, in the restaurant, his mind went on, unbidden, while they were dancing, she'd, suddenly, felt cold to him. She'd suddenly felt-he could not evade the word-*pulpy*.

And, then, this morning-

Norman flung aside the paper. *Stop it!* Trembling, he stared across the room with angry, frightened eyes. It's me, he told himself, *me!* He wasn't going to let his mind destroy the most beautiful thing in his life. He wasn't going to let-

It was as if he'd turned to stone, lips parted, eyes widened, blank. Then, slowly-so slowly that he heard the delicate crackling of bones in his neck-he turned to look toward the kitchen. Adeline was moving around.

Only it wasn't footsteps he heard.

He was barely conscious of his body as he stood. Compelled, he drifted from the living room and across the dining alcove, slippers noiseless on the carpeting. He stopped outside the kitchen door, his face a mask of something like revulsion as he listened to the sounds she made in moving.

Silence then. Bracing himself, he pushed open the door. Adeline was standing at the opened refrigerator. She turned and smiled.

"I was just about to bring you-" She stopped and looked at him uncertainly. "Norman?" she said.

He couldn't speak. He stood frozen in the doorway, staring at her.

"Norman, what is it?" she asked.

He shivered violently.

Adeline put down the dish of chocolate pudding and hurried toward him. He couldn't help himself; he shrank back with a tremulous cry, his face twisted, stricken.

"Norman, what's the matter?"

"I don't know," he whimpered.

Again, she started for him, halting at his cry of terror. Suddenly, her face grew hard as if with angry understanding.

"What is it now?" she asked. "I want to know."

He could only shake his head.

"I want to know, Norman!"

"No." Faintly, frightenedly.

She pressed trembling lips together. "I can't take much more of this," she said. "I mean it, Norman."

He jerked aside as she passed him. Twisting around, he watched her going up the stairs, his expression one of horror as he listened to the noises that she made. Jamming palsied hands across his ears, he stood shivering uncontrollably. *It's me!* he told himself again, again; until the words began to lose their meaning-*me, it's me, it's me, it's me!*

Upstairs, the bedroom door slammed shut. Norman lowered his hands and moved unevenly to the stairs. She had to know that he loved her, that he wanted to believe it was his mind. She had to understand.

Opening the bedroom door, he felt his way through the darkness and sat on the bed. He heard her turn and knew that she was looking at him.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I'm... sick."

"No," she said. Her voice was lifeless.

Norman stared at her. "What?"

"There's no problem with other people, our friends, tradesmen..." she said. "They don't see me enough. With you, it's different. We're together too often. The strain of hiding it from you hour after hour, day after day, for a whole year, is too much for me. I've lost the power to control your mind. All I can do is blank away your senses one by one."

"You're not-"

"-telling you those things are real? I am. They're real. The taste, the smell, the- and what you heard tonight."

He sat immobile, staring at the dark form of her.

"I should have taken all your senses when it started," she said. "It would have been easy then. Now it's too late."

"What are you talking about?" He could barely speak.

"It isn't fair!" cried her voice. "I've been a good wife to you! Why should I have to go back? I *won't* go back! I'll find somebody else. I won't make the same mistake next time!"

Norman jerked away from her and stood on wavering legs, his fingers clutching for the lamp.

"*Don't touch it!*" ordered the voice.

The light flared blindingly into his eyes. He heard a thrashing on the bed and whirled. He couldn't even scream. Sound coagulated in his throat as he watched the shapeless mass rear upward, dripping decay.

"All right!" the words exploded in his brain with the illusion of sound. "All right, then *know* me!"

All his senses flooded back at once. The air was clotted with the smell of her. Norman recoiled, lost balance, fell. He saw the mouldering bulk rise from the bed and start for him. Then his mind was swallowed in consuming blackness and it seemed as if he fled along a night-swept hall pursued by a suppliant voice which kept repeating endlessly, "Please! I don't want to go back! *None of us want to go back!*"

Love me, let me stay with you! love me, love me, love me..."

19 - THE LIKENESS OF JULIE

OCTOBER.

Eddy Foster had never noticed the girl in his English class until that day.

It wasn't because she sat behind him. Any number of times, he'd glanced around while Professor Euston was writing on the blackboard or reading to them from *College Literature*. Any number of times, he'd seen her as he left or entered the classroom. Occasionally, he'd passed her in the hallways or on the campus. Once, she'd even touched him on the shoulder during class and handed him a pencil which had fallen from his pocket.

Still, he'd never noticed her the way he noticed other girls. First of all, she had no figure-or if she did she kept it hidden under loose-fitting clothes. Second, she wasn't pretty and she looked too young. Third, her voice was faint and high-pitched.

Which made it curious that he should notice her that day. All through class, he'd been thinking about the redhead in the first row. In the theatre of his mind he'd staged her-and himself-through an endless carnal play. He was just raising the curtain on another act when he heard the voice behind him.

"Professor?" it asked.

"Yes, Miss Eldridge."

Eddy glanced across his shoulder as Miss Eldridge asked a question about *Beowulf*. He saw the plainness of her little girl's face, heard her faltering voice, noticed the loose yellow sweater she was wearing. And, as he watched, the thought came suddenly to him.

Take her.

Eddy turned back quickly, his heartbeat jolting as if he'd spoken the words aloud. He repressed a grin. What a screwy idea that was. Take *her*? With no

figure? With that kid's face of hers?

That was when he realized it was her face which had given him the idea. The very childishness of it seemed to needle him perversely.

There was a noise behind him. Eddy glanced back. The girl had dropped her pen and was bending down to get it. Eddy felt a crawling tingle in his flesh as he saw the strain of her bust against the tautening sweater. Maybe she had a figure after all. That was more exciting yet. A child afraid to show her ripening body. The notion struck dark fire in Eddy's mind.

Eldridge, Julie, read the year book. *St. Louis, Arts & Sciences*. As he'd expected, she belonged to no sorority or organizations. He looked at her photograph and she seemed to spring alive in his imaginations-shy, withdrawn, existing in a shell of warped repressions. He had to have her.

Why? He asked himself the question endlessly but no logical answer ever came. Still, visions of her were never long out of his mind-the two of them locked in a cabin at the *Hiway Motel*, the wall heater crowding their lungs with oven air while they rioted in each other's flesh; he and this degraded innocent.

The bell had rung and, as the students left the classroom, Julie dropped her books.

"Here, let me pick them up," said Eddy.

"Oh." She stood motionless while he collected them. From the corners of his eyes, he saw the ivory smoothness of her legs. He shuddered and stood with the books.

"Here," he said.

"Thank you." Her eyes lowered and the faintest of colour touched her cheeks. She wasn't so bad-looking, Eddy thought. And she did have a figure. Not much of one but a figure.

"What is it we're supposed to read for tomorrow?" he heard himself asking.

"The-'Wife of Bath's Tale,' isn't it?" she asked.

"Oh, is that it?" Ask her for a date, he thought.

"Yes. I think so."

He nodded. Ask her now, he thought.

"Well," said Julie. She began to turn away.

Eddy smiled remotely at her and felt his stomach muscles trembling.

"Be seeing you," he said.

We stood in the darkness staring at her window. Inside the room, the light went on as Julie came back from the bathroom. She wore a terry cloth robe and was carrying a towel, a washcloth, and a plastic soap box. Eddy watched her put the washcloth and soap box on her bureau and sit down on the bed.

He stood there rigidly, watching her with eyes that did not blink. What was he doing here? he thought. If anybody caught him, he'd be arrested. He had to leave.

Julie stood. She undid the sash at her waist and the bathrobe slipped to the floor. Eddy froze. He parted his lips, sucking at the damp air. She had the body of a woman-full-hipped with breasts that both jutted and hung. And with that pretty child's face-Eddy felt hot breath forcing out between his lips. He muttered, "*Julie, Julie, Julie-*" Julie turned away to dress.

The idea was insane. He knew it but he couldn't get away from it. No matter how he tried to think of something else, it kept returning.

He'd invite her to a drive-in movie, drug her Coke there, take her to the *Hiway Motel*. To guarantee his safety afterward, he'd take photographs of her and threaten to send them to her parents if she said anything.

The idea was insane. He knew it but he couldn't fight it. He had to do it now-now when she was still a stranger to him; an unknown female with a child's face and a woman's body. That was what he wanted; not an individual.

No! It was insane! He cut his English class twice in succession. He drove home for the weekend. He saw a lot of movies. He read magazines and took long walks. He could beat this thing.

Miss Eldridge?"

Julie stopped. As she turned to face him, the sun made ripples on her hair. She looked very pretty, Eddy thought.

"Can I walk with you?" he asked.

"All right," she said.

They walked along the campus path.

"I was wondering," said Eddy, "if you'd like to go to the drive-in movie Friday night." He was startled at the calmness of his voice.

"Oh," said Julie. She glanced at him shyly. "What's playing?" she asked.

He told her.

"That sounds very nice," she said.

Eddy swallowed. "Good," he answered. "What time shall I pick you up?"

He wondered, later, if it made her curious that he didn't ask her where she lived.

There was a light burning on the porch of the house she roomed in. Eddy pushed the bell and waited, watching two moths flutter around the light. After several moments, Julie opened the door. She looked almost beautiful, he thought. He'd never seen her dressed so well.

"Hello," she said.

"Hi," he answered. "Ready to go?"

"I'll get my coat." She went down the hall and into her room. In there, she'd stood naked that night, her body glowing in the light. Eddy pressed his teeth

together. He'd be all right. She'd never tell anyone when she saw the photographs he was going to take.

Julie came back down the hallway and they went out to the car. Eddy opened the door for her.

"Thank you," she murmured. As she sat down, Eddy caught a glimpse of stockinged knees before she pulled her skirt down. He slammed the door and walked around the car. His throat felt parched.

Ten minutes later, he nosed the car onto an empty ramp in the last row of the drive-in theatre and cut the engine. He reached outside and lifted the speaker off its pole and hooked it over the window. There was a cartoon playing.

"You want some popcorn and Coke?" he asked, feeling a sudden bolt of dread that she might say no.

"Yes. Thank you," Julie said.

"I'll be right back." Eddy pushed out of the car and started for the snack bar. His legs were shaking.

He waited in the milling crowd of students, seeing only his thoughts. Again and again, he shut the cabin door and locked it, pulled the shades down, turned on all the lights, switched on the wall heater. Again and again, he walked over to where Julie lay stupefied and helpless on the bed.

"Yours?" said the attendant.

Eddy started. "Uh-two popcorns and a large and a small Coke," he said.

He felt himself begin to shiver convulsively. He couldn't do it. He might go to jail the rest of his life. He paid the man mechanically and moved off with the cardboard tray. The photographs, you idiot, he thought. They're your protection. He felt angry desire shudder through his body. Nothing was going to stop him. On the way back to the car, he emptied the contents of the packet into the small Coke.

Julie was sitting quietly when he opened the door and slid back in. The feature had begun.

"Here's your Coke," he said. He handed her the small cup with her box of popcorn.

"Thank you," said Julie.

Eddy sat watching the picture. He felt his heart thud slowly like a beaten drum. He felt bugs of perspiration running down his back and sides. The popcorn was dry and tasteless. He kept drinking Coke to wet his throat. Soon now, he thought. He pressed his lips together and stared at the screen. He heard Julie eating popcorn, he heard her drinking Coke.

The thoughts were coming faster now: the door locked, the shades drawn, the

room a bright-lit oven as they twisted on the bed together. Now they were doing things that Eddy almost never thought of-wild, demented things. It was her face, he thought; that damned angel's face of hers. It made the mind seek out every black avenue it could find.

Eddy glanced over at Julie. He felt his hands retract so suddenly that he spilled Coke on his trousers. Her empty cup had fallen on the floor, the box of popcorn turned over on her lap. Her head was lying on the seat back and, for one hideous moment, Eddy thought she was dead.

Then she inhaled raspingly and turned her head towards him. He saw her tongue move, dark and sluggish, on her lips.

Suddenly, he was deadly calm again. He picked the speaker off the window and hung it up outside. He threw out the cups and boxes. He started the engine and backed out into the aisle. He turned on his parking lights and drove out of the theatre.

Hiway Motel. The sign blinked off and on a quarter of a mile away. For a second, Eddy thought he read *No Vacancy* and he made a frightened sound. Then he saw that he was wrong. He was still trembling as he circled the car around the drive and parked to one side of the office.

Bracing himself, he went inside and rang the bell. He was very calm and the man didn't say a word to him. He had Eddy fill out the registration card and gave him the key.

Eddy pulled his car into the breezeway beside the cabin. He put his camera in the room, then went out and looked around. There was no one in sight. He ran to the car and opened the door. He carried Julie to the cabin door, his shoes crunching quickly on the gravel. He carried her into the dark room and dropped her on the bed.

Then it was his dream coming true. The door was locked. He moved around the room on quivering legs, pulling down the shades. He turned on the wall heater. He found the light switch by the door and pushed it up. He turned on all the lamps and pulled their shades off. He dropped one of them and it rolled across the rug. He left it there. He went over to where Julie lay.

In falling to the bed, her skirt had pulled up to her thighs. He could see the tops of her stockings and the garter buttons fastened to them. Swallowing, Eddy sat down and drew her up into a sitting position. He took her sweater off. Shakily, he reached around her and unhooked her bra; her breasts slipped free. Quickly, he unzipped her skirt and pulled it down.

In seconds, she was naked. Eddy propped her against the pillows, posing her. *Dear God, the body on her.* Eddy closed his eyes and shuddered. *No*, he thought, *this is the important part. First get the photographs and you'll be safe. She can't*

do anything to you then; she'll be too scared. He stood up, tensely, and got his camera. He set the dials. He got her centred on the viewer. Then he spoke.

"Open your eyes," he said.

Julie did.

He was at her house before six the next morning, moving up the alley cautiously and into the yard outside her window. He hadn't slept all night. His eyes felt dry and hot.

Julie was on her bed exactly as he'd placed her. He looked at her a moment, his heartbeat slow and heavy. Then he raked a nail across the screen. "Julie," he said.

She murmured indistinctly and turned onto her side. She faced him now.

"Julie."

Her eyes fluttered open. She stared at him dazedly. "Who's that?" she asked.

"Eddy. Let me in."

"Eddy?"

Suddenly, she caught her breath and shrank back and he knew that she remembered.

"Let me in or you're in trouble," he muttered. He could feel his legs begin to shake.

Julie lay motionless a few seconds, eyes fixed on his. Then she pushed to her feet and weaved unsteadily towards the door. Eddy turned for the alley. He strode down it nervously and started up the porch steps as she came outside.

"What do you want?" she whispered. She looked exciting, half asleep, her clothes and hair all mussed.

"Inside," he said.

Julie stiffened. "No."

"All right, come on," he said, taking her hand roughly. "We'll talk in my car."

She walked with him to the car and, as he slid in beside her, he saw that she was shivering.

"I'll turn on the heater," he said. It sounded stupidly inane. He was here to threaten her, not comfort. Angrily, he started the engine and drove away from the curb.

"Where are we going?" Julie asked.

He didn't know at first. Then, suddenly, he thought of the place outside of town where dating students always parked. It would be deserted at this hour. Eddy felt a swollen tingling in his body and he pressed down on the accelerator. Sixteen minutes later, the car was standing in the silent woods. A pale mist hung across the ground and seemed to lap at the doors.

Julie wasn't shivering now; the inside of the car was hot.

"What is it?" she asked, faintly.

Impulsively, Eddy reached into his inside coat pocket and pulled out the photographs. He threw them on her lap.

Julie didn't make a sound. She just stared down at the photographs with frozen eyes, her fingers twitching as she held them.

"Just in case you're thinking of calling the police," Eddy faltered. He clenched his teeth. *Tell her!* he thought savagely. In a dull, harsh voice, he told her everything he'd done the night before. Julie's face grew pale and rigid as she listened. Her hands pressed tautly at each other. Outside, the mist appeared to rise around the windows like a chalky fluid. It surrounded them.

"You want money?" Julie whispered.

"Take off your clothes," he said. It wasn't his voice, it occurred to him. The sound of it was too malignant, too inhuman.

Then Julie whimpered and Eddy felt a surge of blinding fury boil upward in him. He jerked his hand back, saw it flail out in a blur of movement, heard the sound of it striking her on the mouth, felt the sting across his knuckles.

"Take them off!" His voice was deafening in the stifling closeness of the car. Eddy blinked and gasped for breath. He stared dizzily at Julie as, sobbing, she began to take her clothes off. There was a thread of blood trickling from a corner of her mouth. *No, don't,* he heard a voice beg in his mind. *Don't do this.* It faded quickly as he reached for her with alien hands.

When he got home at ten that morning there was blood and skin under his nails. The sight of it made him violently ill. He lay trembling on his bed, lips quivering, eyes staring at the ceiling. *I'm through,* he thought. He had the photographs. He didn't have to see her any more. It would destroy him if he saw her any more. Already, his brain felt like rotting sponge, so bloated with corruption that the pressure of his skull caused endless overflow into his thoughts. Trying to sleep, he thought, instead, about the bruises on her lovely body, the ragged scratches, and the bite marks. He heard her screaming in his mind.

He would not see her any more.

DECEMBER

Julie opened her eyes and saw tiny falling shadows on the wall. She turned her head and looked out through the window. It was beginning to snow. The whiteness of it reminded her of the morning Eddy had first shown her the photographs.

The photographs. That was what had woken her. She closed her eyes and

concentrated. They were burning. She could see the prints and negatives scattered on the bottom of a large enamel pan-the kind used for developing film. Bright flames crackled on them and the enamel was smudging.

Julie held her breath. She pushed her mental gaze further-to scan the room that was lit by the flaming enamel pan-until it came to rest upon the broken thing that dangled and swayed, suspended from the closet hook.

She sighed. It hadn't lasted very long. That was the trouble with a mind like Eddy's. The very weakness which made it vulnerable to her soon broke it down. Julie opened her eyes, her ugly child's face puckered in a smile. Well, there were others.

She stretched her scrawny body languidly. Posing at the window, the drugged Coke, the motel photographs-these were getting dull by now although that place in the woods was wonderful. Especially in the early morning with the mist outside, the car like an oven. That she'd keep for a while; and the violence of course. The rest would have to go. She'd think of something better next time.

Philip Harrison had never noticed the girl in his Physics class until that day-

20 - PREY

Amelia arrived at her apartment at six-fourteen. Hanging her coat in the hall closet, she carried the small package into the living room and sat on the sofa. She nudged off her shoes while she unwrapped the package on her lap. The wooden box resembled a casket. Amelia raised its lid and smiled. It was the ugliest doll she'd ever seen. Seven inches long and carved from wood, it had a skeletal body and an oversized head. Its expression was maniacally fierce, its pointed teeth completely bared, its glaring eyes protuberant. It clutched an eight-inch spear in its right hand. A length of fine, gold chain was wrapped around its body from the shoulders to the knees. A tiny scroll was wedged between the doll and the inside wall of its box. Amelia picked it up and unrolled it. There was handwriting on it. *This is He Who Kills*, it began. *He is a deadly hunter*. Amelia smiled as she read the rest of the words. Arthur would be pleased.

The thought of Arthur made her turn to look at the telephone on the table beside her. After a while, she sighed and set the wooden box on the sofa. Lifting the telephone to her lap, she picked up the receiver and dialled a number.

Her mother answered.

"Hello, Mom," Amelia said.

"Haven't you left yet?" her mother asked.

Amelia steeled herself. "Mom, I know it's Friday night-" she started.

She couldn't finish. There was silence on the line. Amelia closed her eyes. Mom, please, she thought. She swallowed. "There's this man," she said. "His name is Arthur Breslow. He's a high school teacher."

"You aren't coming," her mother said.

Amelia shivered. "It's his birthday," she said. She opened her eyes and looked at the doll. "I sort of promised him we'd... spend the evening together."

Her mother was silent. There aren't any good movies playing tonight, anyway, Amelia's mind continued. "We could go tomorrow night," she said.

Her mother was silent.

"Mom?"

"Now even Friday night's too much for you."

"Mom, I see you two, three nights a week."

"To visit," said her mother. "When you have your own room here."

"Mom, *let's not start on that again*" Amelia said. I'm not a child, she thought. Stop treating me as though I were a child!

"How long have you been seeing him?" her mother asked.

"A month or so."

"Without telling me," her mother said.

"I had every intention of telling you." Amelia's head was starting to throb. I will *not* get a headache, she told herself. She looked at the doll. It seemed to be glaring at her. "He's a nice man, Mom," she said.

Her mother didn't speak. Amelia felt her stomach muscles drawing taut. I won't be able to eat tonight, she thought.

She was conscious suddenly of huddling over the telephone.

She forced herself to sit erect. *I'm thirty-three years old*, she thought. Reaching out, she lifted the doll from its box. "You should see what I'm giving him for his birthday," she said. "I found it in a curio shop on Third Avenue. It's a genuine Zuni fetish doll, extremely rare. Arthur is a buff on anthropology. That's why I got it for him."

There was silence on the line. All right, *don't talk*, Amelia thought. "It's a hunting fetish," she continued, trying hard to sound untroubled. "It's supposed to have the spirit of a Zuni hunter trapped inside it. There's a golden chain around it to prevent the spirit from-" She couldn't think of the word; ran a shaking finger over the chain. "-escaping, I guess," she said. "His name is He Who Kills. You should see his face." She felt warm tears trickling down her cheeks.

"Have a good time," said her mother, hanging up.

Amelia stared at the receiver, listening to the dial tone. Why is it always like this? she thought. She dropped the receiver onto its cradle and set aside the telephone. The darkening room looked blurred to her. She stood the doll on the coffee-table edge and pushed to her feet. I'll take my bath now, she told herself. I'll meet him and we'll have a lovely time. She walked across the living room. A lovely time, her mind repeated emptily. She knew it wasn't possible. Oh, *Monti* she thought. She clenched her fists in helpless fury as she went into the bedroom.

In the living room, the doll fell off the table edge. It landed head down and the spear point, sticking into the carpet, braced the doll's legs in the air.

The fine, gold chain began to slither downward.

It was almost dark when Amelia came back into the living room. She had taken off her clothes and was wearing her terrycloth robe. In the bathroom, water was running into the tub.

She sat on the sofa and placed the telephone on her lap. For several minutes, she stared at it. At last, with a heavy sigh, she lifted the receiver and dialled a number.

"Arthur?" she said when he answered;

"Yes?" Amelia knew the tone-pleasant but suspecting. She couldn't speak.

"Your mother," Arthur finally said.

That cold, heavy sinking in her stomach. "It's our night together," she explained. "Every Friday-" She stopped and waited. Arthur didn't speak. "I've mentioned it before," she said.

"I know you've mentioned it," he said.

Amelia rubbed at her temple.

"She's still running your life, isn't she?" he said.

Amelia tensed. "I just don't want to hurt her feelings anymore," she said. "My moving out was hard enough on her."

"I don't want to hurt her feelings either," Arthur said. "But how many birthdays a year do I have? We *planned* on this."

"I know." She felt her stomach muscles tightening again.

"Are you really going to let her do this to you?" Arthur asked. "One Friday night out of the whole year?"

Amelia closed her eyes. Her lips moved soundlessly. I just can't hurt her feelings anymore, she thought. She swallowed. "She's my mother," she said.

"Very well," he said. "I'm sorry. I was looking forward to it, but-" He paused. "I'm sorry," he said. He hung up quietly.

Amelia sat in silence for a long time, listening to the dial tone. She started when the recorded voice said loudly, "Please hang up." Putting the receiver

down, she replaced the telephone on its table. So much for my birthday present, she thought. It would be pointless to give it to Arthur now. She reached out, switching on the table lamp. She'd take the doll back tomorrow.

The doll was not on the coffee table. Looking down, Amelia saw the gold chain lying on the carpet. She eased off the sofa edge onto her knees and picked it up, dropping it into the wooden box. The doll was not beneath the coffee table. Bending over, Amelia felt around underneath the sofa.

She cried out, jerking back her hand. Straightening up, she turned to the lamp and looked at her hand. There was something wedged beneath the index fingernail. She shivered as she plucked it out. It was the head of the doll's spear. She dropped it into the box and put the finger in her mouth. Bending over again, she felt around more cautiously beneath the sofa.

She couldn't find the doll. Standing with a weary groan, she started pulling one end of the sofa from the wall. It was terribly heavy. She recalled the night that she and her mother had shopped for the furniture. She'd wanted to furnish the apartment in Danish modern. Mother had insisted on this heavy, maple sofa; it had been on sale. Amelia grunted as she dragged it from the wall. She was conscious of the water running in the bathroom. She'd better turn it off soon.

She looked at the section of carpet she'd cleared, catching sight of the spear shaft. The doll was not beside it. Amelia picked it up and set it on the coffee table. The doll was caught beneath the sofa, she decided; when she'd moved the sofa, she had moved the doll as well.

She thought she heard a sound behind her-fragile, skittering. Amelia turned. The sound had stopped. She felt a chill move up the backs of her legs. "It's He Who Kills," she said with a smile. "He's taken off his chain and gone-"

She broke off suddenly. There had definitely been a noise inside the kitchen; a metallic, rasping sound. Amelia swallowed nervously. What's going on? she thought. She walked across the living room and reached into the kitchen, switching on the light. She peered inside. Everything looked normal. Her gaze moved falteringly across the stove, the pan of water on it, the table and chair, the drawers and cabinet doors all shut, the electric clock, the small refrigerator with the cookbook lying on top of it, the picture on the wall, the knife rack fastened to the cabinet side-

-its small knife missing.

Amelia stared at the knife rack. Don't be silly, she told herself. She'd put the knife in the drawer, that's all. Stepping into the kitchen, she pulled out the silverware drawer. The knife was not inside it.

Another sound made her look down quickly at the floor. She gasped in shock. For several moments, she could not react; then, stepping to the doorway, she

looked into the living room, her heartbeat thudding. Had it been imagination? She was sure she'd seen a movement.

"Oh, come on," she said. She made a disparaging sound. She hadn't seen a thing.

Across the room, the lamp went out.

Amelia jumped so startledly, she rammed her right elbow against the doorjamb. Crying out, she clutched the elbow with her left hand, eyes closed momentarily, her face a mask of pain.

She opened her eyes and looked into the darkened living room. "Come on," she told herself in aggravation. Three sounds plus a burned-out bulb did not add up to anything as idiotic as-

She willed away the thought. She had to turn the water off. Leaving the kitchen, she started for the hall. She rubbed her elbow, grimacing.

There was another sound. Amelia froze. Something was coming across the carpet toward her. She looked down dumbly. No, she thought.

She saw it then-a rapid movement near the floor. There was a glint of metal, instantly, a stabbing pain in her right calf. Amelia gasped. She kicked out blindly. Pain again. She felt warm blood running down her skin. She turned and lunged into the hall. The throw rug slipped beneath her and she fell against the wall, hot pain lancing through her right ankle. She clutched at the wall to keep from falling, then went sprawling on her side. She thrashed around with a sob of fear.

More movement, dark on dark. Pain in her left calf, then her right again. Amelia cried out. Something brushed along her thigh. She scrabbled back, then lurched up blindly, almost falling again. She fought for balance, reaching out convulsively. The heel of her left hand rammed against the wall, supporting her. She twisted around and rushed into the darkened bedroom. Slamming the door, she fell against it, panting. Something banged against it on the other side, something small and near the floor.

Amelia listened, trying not to breathe so loudly. She pulled carefully at the knob to make sure the latch had caught. When there were no further sounds outside the door, she backed toward the bed. She started as she bumped against the mattress edge. Slumping down, she grabbed at the extension phone and pulled it to her lap. Whom could she call? The police? They'd think her mad. Mother? She was too far off.

She was dialling Arthur's number by the light from the bathroom when the doorknob started turning. Suddenly, her fingers couldn't move. She stared across the darkened room. The door latch clicked. The telephone slipped off her lap.

She heard it thudding onto the carpet as the door swung open. Something dropped from the outside knob.

Amelia jerked back, pulling up her legs. A shadowy form was scurrying across the carpet toward the bed. She gaped at it.

It isn't true, she thought. She stiffened at the tugging on her bedspread. *It was climbing up to get her.* No, she thought; *it isn't true.* She couldn't move. She stared at the edge of the mattress.

Something that looked like a tiny head appeared. Amelia twisted around with a cry of shock, flung herself across the bed and jumped to the floor. Plunging into the bathroom, she spun around and slammed the door, gasping at the pain in her ankle. She had barely thumbed in the button on the doorknob when something banged against the bottom of the door. Amelia heard a noise like the scratching of a rat. Then it was still.

She turned and leaned across the tub. The level of the water was almost to the overflow drain. As she twisted shut the faucets, she saw drops of blood falling into the water. Straightening up, she turned to the medicine-cabinet mirror above the sink.

She caught her breath in horror as she saw the gash across her neck. She pressed a shaking hand against it. Abruptly, she became aware of pain in her legs and looked down. She'd been slashed along the calves of both legs. Blood was running down her ankles, dripping off the edges of her feet. Amelia started crying. Blood ran between the fingers of the hand against her neck. It trickled down her wrist. She looked at her reflection through a glaze of tears.

Something in her aroused her, a wretchedness, a look of terrified surrender. *No*, she thought. She reached out for the medicine-cabinet door. Opening it, she pulled out iodine, gauze and tape. She dropped the cover of the toilet seat and sank down gingerly. It was a struggle to remove the stopper of the iodine bottle. She had to rap it hard against the sink three times before it opened.

The burning of the antiseptic on her calves made her gasp. Amelia clenched her teeth as she wrapped gauze around her right leg.

A sound made her twist toward the door. She saw the knife blade being jabbed beneath it. *It's trying to stab my feet*, she thought; *it thinks I'm standing there.* She felt unreal to be considering its thoughts. *This is He Who Kill*, the scroll flashed suddenly across her mind. *He is a deadly hunter.* Amelia stared at the poking knife blade. God, she thought.

Hastily, she bandaged both her legs, then stood and, looking into the mirror, cleaned the blood from her neck with a wash-rag. She swabbed some iodine

along the edges of the gash, hissing at the fiery pain.

She whirled at the new sound, heartbeat leaping. Stepping to the door, she leaned down, listening hard. There was a faint metallic noise inside the knob.

The doll was trying to unlock it.

Amelia backed off slowly, staring at the knob. She tried to visualize the doll. Was it hanging from the knob by one arm, using the other to probe inside the knob lock with the knife? The vision was insane. She felt an icy prickling on the back of her neck. *I mustn't let it in*, she thought.

A hoarse cry pulled her lips back as the doorknob button popped out. Reaching out impulsively, she dragged a bath towel off its rack. The doorknob turned, the latch clicked free. The door began to open.

Suddenly the doll came darting in. It moved so quickly that its figure blurred before Amelia's eyes. She swung the towel down hard, as though it were a huge bug rushing at her. The doll was knocked against the wall. Amelia heaved the towel on top of it and lurched across the floor, gasping at the pain in her ankle. Flinging open the door, she lunged into the bedroom.

She was almost to the hall door when her ankle gave. She pitched across the carpet with a cry of shock. There was a noise behind her. Twisting around, she saw the doll come through the bathroom doorway like a jumping spider. She saw the knife blade glinting in the light. Then the doll was in the shadows, coming at her fast. Amelia scrambled back. She glanced over her shoulder, saw the closet and backed into its darkness, clawing for the doorknob.

Pain again, an icy slashing at her foot. Amelia screamed and heaved back. Reaching up, she yanked a topcoat down. It fell across the doll. She jerked down everything in reach. The doll was buried underneath a mound of blouses, skirts and dresses. Amelia pitched across the moving pile of clothes. She forced herself to stand and limped into the hall as quickly as she could. The sound of thrashing underneath the clothes faded from her hearing. She hobbled to the door. Unlocking it, she pulled the knob.

The door was held. Amelia reached up quickly to the bolt. It had been shot. She tried to pull it free. It wouldn't budge. She clawed at it with sudden terror. It was twisted out of shape. "No," she muttered. *She was trapped*. "Oh, God." She started pounding on the door. "Please help me! *Help* me!"

Sound in the bedroom. Amelia whirled and lurched across the living room. She dropped to her knees beside the sofa, feeling for the telephone, but her fingers trembled so much that she couldn't dial the numbers. She began to sob, then twisted around with a strangled cry. The doll was rushing at her from the hallway.

Amelia grabbed an ashtray from the coffee table and hurled it at the doll. She

threw a vase, a wooden box, a figurine. She couldn't hit the doll. It reached her, started jabbing at her legs. Amelia reared up blindly and fell across the coffee table. Rolling to her knees, she stood again. She staggered toward the hall, shoving over furniture to stop the doll. She toppled a chair, a table. Picking up a lamp, she hurled it at the floor. She backed into the hall and, spinning, rushed into the closet, slammed the door shut.

She held the knob with rigid fingers. Waves of hot breath pulsed against her face. She cried out as the knife was jabbed beneath the door, its sharp point sticking into one of her toes. She shuffled back, shifting her grip on the knob. Her robe hung open. She could feel a trickle of blood between her breasts. Her legs felt numb with pain. She closed her eyes. Please, someone help, she thought.

She stiffened as the doorknob started turning in her grasp. Her flesh went cold. It couldn't be stronger than she: it *couldn't* be. Amelia tightened her grip. *Please*, she thought. The side of her head bumped against the front edge of her suitcase on the shelf.

The thought exploded in her mind. Holding the knob with her right hand, she reached up, fumbling, with her left. The suitcase clasps were open. With a sudden wrench, she turned the doorknob, shoving at the door as hard as possible. It rushed away from her. She heard it bang against the wall. The doll thumped down.

Amelia reached up, hauling down her suitcase. Yanking open the lid, she fell to her knees in the closet doorway, holding the suitcase like an open book. She braced herself, eyes wide, teeth clenched together. She felt the doll's weight as it banged against the suitcase bottom. Instantly, she slammed the lid and threw the suitcase flat. Falling across it, she held it shut until her shaking hands could fasten the clasps. The sound of them clicking into place made her sob with relief. She shoved away the suitcase. It slid across the hall and bumped against the wall. Amelia struggled to her feet, trying not to listen to the frenzied kicking and scratching inside the suitcase.

She switched on the hall light and tried to open the bolt. It was hopelessly wedged. She turned and limped across the living room, glancing at her legs. The bandages were hanging loose. Both legs were streaked with caking blood, some of the gashes still bleeding. She felt at her throat. The cut was still wet. Amelia pressed her shaking lips together. She'd get to a doctor soon now.

Removing the ice pick from its kitchen drawer, she returned to the hall. A cutting sound made her look toward the suitcase. She caught her breath. The knife blade was protruding from the suitcase wall, moving up and down with a sawing motion. Amelia stared at it. She felt as though her body had been turned

to stone.

She limped to the suitcase and knelt beside it, looking, with revulsion at the sawing blade. It was smeared with blood. She tried to pinch it with the fingers of her left hand, pull it out. The blade was twisted, jerked down, and she cried out, snatching back her hand. There was a deep slice in her thumb. Blood ran down across her palm. Amelia pressed the finger to her robe. She felt as though her mind was going blank.

Pushing to her feet, she limped back to the door and started prying at the bolt. She couldn't get it loose. Her thumb began to ache. She pushed the ice pick underneath the bolt socket and tried to force it off the wall. The ice pick point broke off. Amelia slipped and almost fell. She pushed up, whimpering. There was no time, no time. She looked around in desperation.

The window! She could throw the suitcase out! She visualized it tumbling through the darkness. Hastily, she dropped the ice pick, turning toward the suitcase.

She froze. The doll had forced its head and shoulders through the rent in the suitcase wall. Amelia watched it struggling to get out. She felt paralyzed. The twisting doll was staring at her. No, she thought, it isn't true. The doll jerked free its legs and jumped to the floor.

Amelia jerked around and ran into the living room. Her right foot landed on a shard of broken crockery. She felt it cutting deep into her heel and lost her balance. Landing on her side, she thrashed around. The doll came leaping at her. She could see the knife blade glint. She kicked out wildly, knocking back the doll. Lunging to her feet, she reeled into the kitchen, whirled, and started pushing shut the door.

Something kept it from closing. Amelia thought she heard a screaming in her mind. Looking down, she saw the knife and a tiny wooden hand. The doll's arm was wedged between the door and the jamb! Amelia shoved against the door with all her might, aghast at the strength with which the door was pushed the other way. There was a cracking noise. A fierce smile pulled her lips back and she pushed berserkly at the door. The screaming in her mind grew louder, drowning out the sound of splintering wood.

The knife blade sagged. Amelia dropped to her knees and tugged at it. She pulled the knife into the kitchen, seeing the wooden hand and wrist fall from the handle of the knife. With a gagging noise, she struggled to her feet and dropped the knife into the sink. The door slammed hard against her side; the doll rushed in.

Amelia jerked away from it. Picking up the chair, she slung it toward the doll. It jumped aside, then ran around the fallen chair. Amelia snatched the pan of water

off the stove and hurled it down. The pan clanged loudly off the floor, spraying water on the doll.

She stared at the doll. It wasn't coming after her. It was trying to climb the sink, leaping up and clutching at the counter side with one hand. It wants the knife, she thought. It has to have its weapon.

She knew abruptly what to do. Stepping over to the stove, she pulled down the broiler door and twisted the knob on all the way. She heard the puffing detonation of the gas as she turned to grab the doll.

She cried out as the doll began to kick and twist, its maddened thrashing flinging her from one side of the kitchen to the other. The screaming filled her mind again and suddenly she knew it was the spirit in the doll that screamed. She slid and crashed against the table, wrenched herself around and, dropping to her knees before the stove, flung the doll inside. She slammed the door and fell against it.

The door was almost driven out. Amelia pressed her shoulder, then her back against it, turning to brace her legs against the wall. She tried to ignore the pounding scrabble of the doll inside the broiler. She watched the red blood pulsing from her heel. The smell of burning wood began to reach her and she closed her eyes. The door was getting hot. She shifted carefully. The kicking and pounding filled her ears. The screaming flooded through her mind. She knew her back would get burned, but she didn't dare to move. The smell of burning wood grew worse. Her foot ached terribly.

Amelia looked up at the electric clock on the wall. It was four minutes to seven. She watched the red second hand revolving slowly. A minute passed. The screaming in her mind was fading now. She shifted uncomfortably, gritting her teeth against the burning heat on her back.

Another minute passed. The kicking and the pounding stopped. The screaming faded more and more. The smell of burning wood had filled the kitchen. There was a pall of gray smoke in the air. That they'll see, Amelia thought. Now that it's over, they'll come and help. That's the way it always is.

She started to ease herself away from the broiler door, ready to throw her weight back against it if she had to. She turned around and got on her knees. The reek of charred wood made her nauseated. She had to know, though. Reaching out, she pulled down the door.

Something dark and stifling rushed across her and she heard the screaming in her mind once more as hotness flooded over her and into her. It was a scream of victory now.

Amelia stood and turned off the broiler. She took a pair of ice tongs from its drawer and lifted out the blackened twist of wood. She dropped it into the sink

and ran water over it until the smoke had stopped. Then she went into the bedroom, picked up the telephone and depressed its cradle. After a moment, she released the cradle and dialled her mother's number.

"This is Amelia, Mom," she said. "I'm sorry I acted the way I did. I want us to spend the evening together. It's a little late, though. Can you come by my place and we'll go from here?" She listened. "Good," she said. "I'll wait for you."

Hanging up, she walked into the kitchen, where she slid the longest carving knife from its place in the rack. She went to the front door and pushed back its bolt, which now moved freely. She carried the knife into the living room, took off her bathrobe and danced a dance of hunting, of the joy of hunting, of the joy of the impending kill.

Then she sat down, cross-legged, in the corner. He Who Kills sat, cross-legged, in the corner, in the darkness, waiting for the prey to come.

THE END

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